By Reagan Warner

Grim Fandango

Chapter 1 – Enter Death

Everything began when I died. Life doesn't count. I fouled that up good, but death gave me a second chance I never expected. So this is where I'm beginning – My Judgement Day.

I got one hell of a shock after I died. It turns out that when we die, our mortal souls move on to the Land of the Dead – where they take the form of our skeletal appearance as it was in life. Picture Spanish Calaca figures that move and interact freely with each other. No skin, no organs, no blood. Just cold, white bone. When the reaper handling my case brought me in, he told me that I had to remain in the Land of the Dead indefinitely. Since I hadn't expected there to even *be* a 'Land of the Dead', I needed an explanation for what was happening and why. But I didn't get one, not really. Not one that made much sense at first. He told me that I had a debt to work off – a moral debt. So I asked him what *that* meant.

"Mr. Calavera…" the reaper began.

"Call me Manny." I said.

The reaper didn't smile. Of course, not with an inflexible bone face; but I sensed, somehow, that he would have been smiling if he could.

"Manny," he said. "When a soul dies, they come here – to the Department of Death – where they are told how they will be travelling the four-year journey across the Land of the Dead. The better a soul lived their life, the better the travel packages are that become available to them. And with a record like yours, you won't be allowed to continue on to the Land of Eternal Rest for quite some time. Your debt will have to be paid off."

I noticed he hadn't really answered the question.

"Suppose I walk, or hitch a lift? Forget the train or bus or whatever."

"Manny, listen to me: do *not* try to leave town. Not ever. That would be the absolute worst thing you could ever hope to do."

I fumbled with my fifth cigarette since I was brought in, in a pointless attempt to cover up the shaking of my fleshless hands.

"So, are you telling me there are worse things than being stuck in a world of the walking dead?"

"Yes, Manny." He assured me. "Much, much worse."

I took a deep drag on the cigarette. Then another. "So… about this debt, whatever it is… How do I pay it off?"

"You will work for the Department of Death. As a reaper.

"*¡Hijole!*"

I don't have any trouble admitting that they scared the hell out of me: the reaper who handled my case, the trainers, everybody involved in the whole situation. I was shit-my-pants *terrified.*
Once the reaper finished with me I was taken to the DOD training facility and locked down. They put me in this tiny, windowless room (maybe even doorless too, after it had been shut) and left me for I don't know how long. It seemed liked years, but it was probably less than an hour. Then a trainer came in and outlined just what my fate was to be in the most brutal terms possible – for the state of mind I was in, anyway. Maybe he was just being factual, I don't know. He told me stories about souls that remained in the Land of the Dead for centuries, even millennia… and about those who never left. I was already feeling restless, ready to move on; the thought of staying was torture all by itself, never mind the horror stories. By the time the practical part of the training began, I was most definitely ready to be a good boy.

So I started training to be a reaper. They issued me a collapsible scythe, a hooded black robe and abject humiliation. A reaper was supposed to be imposing. Sometimes a soul had to be overawed, almost spiritually bullied, before they will follow you out of the Land of the Living; but with these stumpy legs of mine I don't make much of an impression. So the DOD gave me these things to wear that added almost a foot to my height. It took about half an hour of falling flat on my coccyx before I could even cross the room. I wouldn't have minded so much except that it was part of my official training and I did those thirty minutes of pratfalls in front of more than a dozen other trainees. But I put up with it, making out like they were laughing with me rather than at me. Having decided it was finally time to play by the rules, I found I could accept being humiliated. After the training was finished they assigned me an office in the Bureau of Acquisitions and a driver.

"Why do I need a driver?" I had asked the trainer.
"If the company let YOU guys drive," he said, "you'd all be AWOL in ten minutes."
"Got me there." One of the other trainees cracked.
My driver turned out to be a large demon with fuzzy blue skin that was about five sizes too big for him. He looked like nothing so much as a six-foot-tall Shar-Pei. For some reason his name was Endive. And boy, did the whole 'demon' thing take some getting used to.
"There are two basic kinds of demons," our trainer told us, "those who help souls and those who want to rip you apart."
"And how do you tell the difference?" One guy asked. "*Before* the chiropractic begins, I mean."
The trainer merely huffed and said, "You won't have to worry about THAT for a long time. All of the demons here in El Marrow city are the friendly sort. But if any of you step even one *inch* beyond the city limits you will, I guarantee, shortly become a nest for an acid-spewing bat. And that's if you're lucky."

Endive was definitely the friendly sort. Quiet, very respectful, and thoroughly unhelpful.

"Hey *carnal*, let's go for a ride." I'd say.

"Sorry, sir." Endive would reply. "But the car's having its tires rotated." And he kept on like that. If I didn't want the car for official purposes it was getting a lube job or the timing belt was being adjusted, or something. Eventually, I caught on.

"You're just making excuses, aren't you?" I accused him one day after he fed me another slice of bullshit.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir; but the company won't let me drive you anywhere except to and from the Land of the Living. If I break the rules I could lose my job." He said that like it was the worst thing in the world.

"Why didn't you just say so at the beginning?"

"I don't like to disobey, sir."

"But you *can* lie, apparently."

"Yes, sir. But please don't tell anyone."

I hid my phantom smile by taking a puff on my cigarette. "Still, you can drive whenever you feel like it if I'm not in the car, right?" I'd seen Endive tearing around the streets of El Marrow and he knew it.

"Oh, yes, sir. I have to drive."

"*Have* to?"

"I am an elemental spirit, sir, a spirit of the land. It's what I was made for."

"So let me get this straight…" I said. "You're saying you were created just to drive cars? You have a purpose in being and you *know* what it is?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Endive answered enthusiastically.

That piece of news didn't exactly make my day. By the time this conversation took place I was way past fear and crossing into bitterness. Finding out that demons knew their purpose in life was… it was NOT something I wanted to know. "If only I could have known that kind of thing when *I* was alive…" I kept thinking. "I wouldn't be in this mess now." But, eventually, I got over it and I settled into the job of picking up souls in the Land of the Living and trying to sell them the best travel packages they qualified for.

"Why do some clients qualify for better travel packages?" I had asked our trainer in the beginning.

"They led good lives." He snapped back at me.

"*Qué traes!* How do you define a 'good life'?"

"Better than yours and mine."

Eventually I accepted the rules of the DOD and the restrictions the company placed on its agents. At first, I went along with the rules because I had been scared into line. Later on, because I became fatalistic. But finally, when things started to make some sense, I began following the rules because I became convinced they were right. I never understood completely why the DOD did things the way it did, but I understood enough to see that there must be a reason for it all.

As I read the records of my client's lives, I started to understand why the agent who handled my case wouldn't tell me what was in my file. A soul's life is very complex, not to mention delicate. The files reapers get contain not just a client's actions, but also their thoughts and motivations; whether they are remembered, repressed, or conveniently edited and justified after the fact. All of these things interact in interesting ways for affecting a person's destiny, and it's not always healthy – for the reaper as well as for the client – to go into the details.
A mass murderer is obviously not going to be issued a first-class ticket through the Land of the Dead, but a seemingly good person could be just as bad off. One of my early clients was a philanthropist. He was incredibly wealthy and put most of his money into good causes that helped thousands of people. But he also bullied and humiliated virtually everyone who personally came into contact with him. He loved making his employees crawl, and as for his wife… that woman deserved a ticket on the Number Nine express train if only for what she had put up with. The best that man qualified for was a girly little three-speed bicycle.

The Number Nine train was what every soul entering into the Land of the Dead prayed for. I remember my first Double-N sale. I was beyond envious. When I made to hand the ticket to my admittedly well-deserving client, the little golden slip started to twitch. I was so startled that I let the ticket go… but instead of falling, the ticket leapt straight into his hand! I wouldn't take bets on who was more surprised. I saw a lot of Double-Ns after that and got used to their antics, but I never really got over the envy. Every day I'd come into the building, see that big picture of the Number Nine train hanging in the lobby, and say quietly to myself: "One of these days, I'm going to ride that right on out of here!" A second thought however would always say: 'Yeah, right."

I became a good sales agent after a slow start; after I got over the fear and bitterness, that is. I may have ruined my life, but dead, I started doing okay. My job got to be rewarding. I made friends in the office, settled into a nice apartment, found a cozy little brew-pub where I spent a lot of my off time, and I began to think death was good.
That's when I started to have *serious* problems.
On the surface things were just fine. My job and everything else was fantastic, but I was in the Land of the Dead and having the time of my life. At first that was just ironic, but the contradictions started to really get to me. I began to obsess about little things, like cigarettes. Where did the tobacco come from when no plants grew in the Land of the Dead? And what of the patties in those greasy, half-pound, bacon-and-cheese hamburgers I had almost every day for lunch? *Dios mio,* did I love those things, especially now that I had no arteries to clog. And why did I go to bed every night when I had already entered the big sleep? The Land of the Dead was so normal on the surface, but so indescribably deeply perverse underneath.

My existence in death became a torment – a cruel shadow of life. I realized that I was trapped in a limbo state halfway between the Land of the Living and the Land of Eternal Rest: an awful mixture of both and neither. For most souls the Land of the Dead was just a place to cross through on the way to a better place, but I was condemned to stop in it for I didn't know how long. It was much, MUCH worse than the fear I had experienced in the beginning.

My office manager – a tragic soul named Yehuda – sent me to see the company shrink. She didn't make much progress with me at first. She tried to help me to simply accept the contradictions, but it probably seemed like I was too far gone to listen. I resisted, almost as if I *wanted* to be tormented. Then one day I was sitting in my office, staring blankly at the street below. I decided to jump. 'Dead Man Kills Self' was the tabloid headline I envisioned. I started to laugh and just couldn't stop. Our secretary had the shrink to the office in twenty minutes, and I was still hysterical when she got there. I guess it was my way of touching base. After that, she started to make progress with me. I learned much later that there were people who really DID try to commit suicide. What people could do to themselves in such futile acts is one of the saddest things I've ever heard. After a while existence became bearable, but never again truly, *unreservedly* enjoyable. And that, quite ironically, in the Land of the Dead, is a good thing.

Chapter 2 – Eva, Don, and Domino

The years crawled by. I got a promotion and a fancy new office almost at the top of the building. I became a senior sales agent, and the commissions started just rolling in. I got my clients personal cars, luxury cruises, and LOTS of Double-N tickets. It seemed like bus packages were the worst I did for anyone, but I suppose I did hand out my share of bicycles, packing crates and walking sticks.

I hadn't been in my new office long when the secretary for that division got promoted out. The new one was fresh from the Land of the Living. I decided to give her a hand of one kind or another, so around noon on her first day I perched myself on the edge of her desk and said casually, "So, are you interested in lunch, kid?"

"Would there be any point?" She asked in a thick Brooklyn accent, sounding bitter. I knew that tone well enough not to take it seriously.

"Not as such." I answered. "But do you really want to work straight through to five?"

She didn't have to give that much thought. "Can't say I do, honey. Got a place in mind?"

"Sure do." I replied. I told her about my little brew-pub, and we were on our way.

After we had ordered, she leaned towards me and said matter-of-factly, "So am I supposed to guess your name, or what?"

"Calavera." I said, after a brief chuckle. "Manny Calavera."

"Ok, Cal. I'm Eva Capizzi."

"I know. It's on the nameplate on your desk."

It was Eva's turn to laugh. "You a sales agent or a detective?"

"Both, maybe. I gotta find the best travel packages for my clients, you know. Cigarette? It'll help you relax."

Eva stopped tearing little pieces from her napkin and said with an air of cautiousness, "Sure. You a mind reader, too?"

"No." I said as I gave her the cigarette and lit it. "Just an old hand. I think I went through half a pack while the agent that picked me up told me I was stuck here."

Eva took a long drag. "Thanks, sweetheart." A puzzled look parked itself in front of her skull. She seemed troubled. "Can you tell me what I'm inhaling this smoke with?"

I just shook my head. "You're better off not thinking too much about that."

"I don't just accept things, darling."

"I'm and old hand, remember?" Eva cocked her skull like a dog hearing an unfamiliar word. Not that Eva was a dog, of course; far from it. "Things are pretty strange in the Land of the Dead. They seem like the way they are back home, but trust me – they're not. You can really mess yourself up if you get too concerned about it."

Eva fixed her empty, but strangely beautifully alive eye sockets on me for a few seconds. She took another puff on her coffin nail. "Okay, Cal." She said at last. "I guess you probably know what you're talking about."

"The Land of the Dead gets to you, eventually." I went on. I didn't normally preach, but it seemed important that I somehow keep Eva away from what I had gone through. "This isn't a good place to be stuck in. It looks so much like life, but it just isn't. It's like having a dull ache and not being able to tell where it is. If you try to concentrate on it, if you try to figure it out, you'll go completely nuts. Trust me… find something to distract yourself with. Focus on working off your time and getting out of this nowhere place."

Eva didn't say anything right away. She barely even moved. "I will, Cal." She said softly.

I shook myself. "Sorry. I don't usually do that. It's just…"

"I get you, really."

Fortunately, our food arrived just then.

Eva looked wryly at the enormous, cheese-drenched hamburger the waitress put down in front of me. "I could say something about heart-attacks, but it'd be a little late." She said in a strange way before starting on her salad.

"You definitely are the *late* Eva." I chuckled, nodding to her decisively low-fat plate. "And weight-loss is guaranteed from now on."

She gave me an ethereal grimace. "You had to bring that up while I'm eating, didn't you?" She shook her head. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"What with?" I asked. Eva kicked my shin as hard as she could. Probably I deserved that.

And we went along from there. Our relationship didn't go exactly where I had thought it might, but it was fun anyway. I might come into the office in the morning and ask, "Any messages for me?"

"Your undertaker called." Eva might answer.

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

"Encore!"

But I gave as good as I got, not that Eva would ever admit it.

A few years after Eva's arrival, our boss was promoted out. I can't say I was too thrilled about the new one, Don Copal – but I didn't have much against him either. Not at first, that is. He was certainly different, though. Our last boss had been tough; he demanded premium sales, but he'd also break every bone he had to help you get them. Copal stopped at being demanding. It wasn't long after he came into our little world that someone (I don't know exactly who) christened him the 'Amazing Vanishing Dictator'. He'd be seen entering his office in the morning and usually, soon after, Eva would be saying he wasn't in. And not one soul ever saw him leave. Eva was not happy with the situation either. She was supposed to be the office manager's liaison with the sales agents, not his blocker.

"I wouldn't mind the vanishing so much Cal," Eva said over lunch one day, "except the fat SOB keeps reappearing."

And without warning, he would suddenly be there behind you shouting about what a lousy sales agent you were. It was pure bullshit, but he kept on dumping it. For example, Lana O'Malley was about the hottest agent our office had. When she made four Double-N sales in one week – a new record – Copal chewed her out the following week for not managing it again. The office had a meeting that evening at Lana's favourite 'speak' (not that there was ever prohibition in the Land of the Dead, but 'Peeps' – the owner – had his own ideas about décor, apparently) to try to figure out what to do about the situation.

"Just what the hell," Lana hissed, glaring deep into a cocktail – I think Una Merkel mixed something like it in a movie once, but with less absinthe – in the biggest glass I'd ever seen, "is the problem with this guy? Doesn't he know a freaking miracle when he sees it?"

"I'd *kill* to make four Double-N sales in one week," I groused, "if I could find anyone who wasn't already dead, that is."

"Cute." José Angel said as he twirled a hunk of ice in his drink. "But isn't there *anything* we can do about Copal?"

"Ha!" Eva said, almost mockingly. "Believe me, there's no such thing as a DOD complaint form."

"To work off our time, we have to do what we're told." I put in.

"Thank you, professor." Lana snarled. "I've been working off my time even faster than you. Should I take even more abuse for my efforts?"

"Looks that way." Apollo Schafer said. "Man, I can't figure that dude out!"

"Well, that's helpful." Eva said, apparently with all the irony she had in her.

Apollo threw up his hands. "I can't say *any*thing!"

Eva twisted the emotional knife further. "You never do."

José's hand clacked impatiently on the table we were huddled around. "This isn't helping!"

"Does anything?" I asked. José made to pop off again. "No, wait. I'm serious. Eva's right, there's just no procedure for this."

"I've been at the DOD almost seventy *fucking* years, golden boy." Lana snapped. "There's no 'procedure' because this kind of thing hasn't happened before! We're supposed to be pulling together. We're all in the same boat for crying out loud!"

'The *Titanic*' was the look Eva shot at me seemed to say.

"Okay!" José interjected. "So Copal's standing up in the boat and doing jumping jacks. So just what the hell can we DO about it?"

"Hope we've got most of our time made up?" Apollo suggested.

Instead of a scathing retort, Eva just said: "Lana's been at it seventy years."

"Oh, man!" Apollo muttered. "I did NOT need to be reminded of that."

"Oh, for…" José exclaimed in exasperation. "Can't we come to some sort of decision!?"

"So suggest something!" Eva snapped. "I think we've all said we don't know what can be done, so enlighten us, O wise and wonderful man."

José just glared at Eva. Somehow.

"This is going nowhere." Lana pushed herself away from the table. "Maybe I can find someplace where I can get tight *in peace.*"

"I'll second that." I said and followed her to the door – which I opened for her, because she was old enough to expect it.

"Pig." Eva whispered to me as she slipped through after Lana.

"Oink!" I shot back.

"Lana!" I said to her when I had caught up. "I actually do have an idea!" She looked as if she was going to sock me one. "So why the hell didn't you say so before, damnit?"

"Hey!" I held up my hands. "Friend!"

Lana actually stopped and faced me. "Okay. So what's the idea, Cal?"

"Maybe *we* can't do anything about Copal. We just don't know either way. But my first boss is still with the company. I can see if he has any ideas."

"Not bad, Manny." Lana said as she began walking again, more slowly than before. "He's been with the DOD forever, the poor bastard. Yeah, see what Yehuda knows, but don't talk to him at the office. Don't let Copal get wise to you."

"Don't worry about that. Funny, I don't know where he stops."

"I'll find out from his secretary." Eva chimed in.

"Good." Lana said. "Sounds like we've got ourselves a conspiracy."

The next day I met Eva for lunch.

"Will he be expecting me?" I asked when she gave me the address. He'd moved several times in the years since I'd worked under him.

"Are you out of your ever-loving mind, sweetheart?" Do you have ANY idea how close my desk is to Copal's door?"

"Just asking." I said.

Eva pushed her food around her plate. "Manny…" she finally said. "Do you think Copal's up to something?"

"Like what? Gunning for the Loud-Mouthed Bastard of the Year award?"

"I don't know." She said, staring into her plate. "Maybe there's a reason why he's tearing everyone down."

I shrugged. "Does he need a reason to be an asshole? *I* never did."

"You're not an asshole, darling."

"You didn't know me when I was alive."

Eva sighed and dropped her fork on her plate. "What do we know about Copal? What's his background? How did he screw up and get this job?"

"We don't ask those questions." I answered solemnly. "One of the unwritten rules in the DOD: 'Everybody's a bum, so don't delve into anyone's past.'"

"I don't just accept things, remember?"

"So why are you so bothered? He hasn't been tearing *you* down, has he?"

"And why not?"

I shrugged again. "Because you're not a sales agent, I guess. He can't lay into you for not making enough premium sales."

"Exactly!" Eva said like she was making a big point. "I'm not an agent, so I get slightly better treatment. But why should that make any difference to a guy who's just an asshole? So he's not an equal-opportunity prick?"

"Jeez, Eva! How the hell should I know?"

"Maybe you should find out."

"There are some questions we simply don't ask."

"Okay, Cal. But if certain questions *don't* get asked, how in this sick world will Yehuda be of any help to you?"

Maybe Eva was the mind reader. I went to his home that evening. He fixed me a drink and then settled into his easy chair while I told about our problem. When I'd finished, the tired old man said: "I don't know what I can do to help, Manny. Office managers *are* rather autonomous, you know."

"Yeah, but there are people above him, right? He's gotta answer to somebody."

"We all answer to *somebody,* Manny." Yehuda sighed and shook his head slowly. "But the big boys downtown have larger things to concern themselves with than our piffling office politics."

"So what are you telling me? That all we can do is to wait until he or we are promoted out? That could take quite a while, you know."

"Yes," Yehuda grimaced. "I know."

I had put my foot in it, and I knew it. "Sorry, *mano*. I didn't mean…"

Yehuda impatiently waved the apology away. "Never mind. I made the biggest mistake any man could. I accepted my fate." He said, almost defiantly. "And so should you."

"I don't think Copal is fate, exactly."

"We don't get to choose who we work with. I believe I recall getting a few complaints about you in those first few months. But you improved – remarkably so. I suspect Copal simply hasn't had any management experience, and he may still be bitter that he isn't allowed to go on to his rest. You must make allowances."

"I'll try. I don't know about Lana, though."

We found out about Lana soon enough. When I told her what Yehuda had said, she didn't make any response except to shake her head and walk away. I could almost feel her anger.

I was filing my recent cases a couple of days later when Eva quickly slipped into my office. She looked really shaken. I took out the bottle of scotch I kept in my 'Premium Clients' cabinet and gave it to her. When she had taken a big swallow she told me what was up.

"It's Lana." She answered hoarsely, but not because of the low-quality scotch. "She left town."
I could only stare.
"Her driver tried to stop her. She made it as far as the edge of the forest, but then she walked straight into a web. The spiders had her in pieces within seconds." Eva shuddered. "The others are pretty shaken up."
"Yeah…" I said pointlessly. "She'd been here so long. I was really pulling for her. Damn Copal!"
Eva took another slug of scotch. "If this can happen to someone like Lana, Cal… what chance do *we* have?"
I let out a slow sigh and quietly lit a cigarette to give myself time to think of a decent answer. There wasn't one. "Lana didn't have to leave town, Eva." I finally said, somewhat hesitantly.
"I think she did. I think she knew she had to try. There's something in this office that gave her no choice."
She was so earnest I almost believed her. But I shook my head. "No. She just didn't think things through."
Eva opened her mouth to argue, but Copal chose that moment to burst right in. "So there you are!" He roared. "Just what the hell are you doing away from your desk!?"
"Lana left town." Eva said in a low voice.
"Glad to hear it!" Copal snapped. "Maybe now I can get one decent agent in this office."
I ground my teeth, but said nothing. Copal must've seen my jaw working because he paused and stared menacingly at me. Then he continued with Eva. "So, get back to work with you!"
With that he spun around and stomped out of the office.
Eva hefted the bottle. I grabbed her wrist quickly and pried the bottle away from her. "That'd be a waste of perfectly good rotgut." I said.
"Are you just going to accept this?" She hissed.
"Give me an option."
She just shook her head and left sharply. I glared uselessly at the bottle in my hand. "She could've at least left me enough to get drunk on…" I groused.

An agent to replace Lana arrived the very next day. If I had been under oath, I suppose I would have admitted that this was a good thing. The Bureau of Acquisitions simply cannot be short-handed. People die every single day, after all. But, down in the guts I no longer have, I thought it stunk. We should have had a mourning period. Lana was truly gone… gone in a way beyond what death means to the living. Lana was still there but balkanized, rendered impotent, voiceless, and totally incapable of leaving the Land of the Dead. That's something people need to come to terms with. Instead, Copal thrust a new agent into the space of a good soul he had – whether deliberately or not – driven into hell.

There are no words for how we hated Copal.
And we didn't care much for the new guy. His name was Domino Hurley. We would have disliked him simply because he replaced Lana, but that wouldn't have lasted. He gave us plenty of other reasons.
Offensively self-confident and overtly cocky, he oozed insincere charm and friendliness. He had absolutely no experience as a reaper, which was strange since our division was made up entirely of veterans (the DOD liked to group agents by experience). Hurley just didn't belong with us.

Apollo was so out-of-joint because of the situation that he actually complained to Copal's superiors. That gave Copal an excuse to railroad him out of the company on an insubordination rap. Apollo wasn't going to let that keep him in the Land of the Dead, though. He headed off for the Land of Eternal Rest. But, unlike Lana, he thought ahead. He persuaded his driver to come along. A few months later we actually got a postcard from Puerto Zapato. Since he made it that far, I like to think that he actually made it to the end of the line, although his driver never did return to El Marrow. And the punch-line is that while Copal couldn't replace Lana fast enough, Apollo's office was converted into a supply room. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When I came into the office the morning after Lana left town, I found Eva in a pretty agitated state. Domino was the first agent in to work, and he had kept Eva hopping as he started making Lana's office his own. When I stepped out of the elevator Eva was just hanging up the phone. I was greeted by her picking up the office's appointment book and then slamming it down on her desk as hard as she could.

"Any messages for me?" I asked.

"I'm in no mood for jokes, Cal!" She barked. I actually took a step back. I don't think I'd ever seen Eva like that before. Sure, she'd been angry plenty of times, but never so thoroughly enraged.
I must have just stood there for about five seconds before I inanely said without thinking: "Really?" But that got me the whole story on Domino Hurley. It was Copal (who wasn't in the office yet) she had been talking to on the phone. Hurley wanted Eva to get a new computer for his office, and she went nuts at that. She wanted Copal's support in reining in Hurley and didn't get it. In fact, Copal told her to give Domino whatever he wanted. To Eva's mind, the office was her domain. The office manager's only concern was 'the little stuff', by which she meant us agents. Well, she had a point… of sorts. In any case, she was being jerked around on two tethers – I wouldn't have liked it if I had been in her place, either.

But at first I thought Eva was overreacting. That is, until I had my first 'Domino experience' a couple of minutes later.

I went into Lana's office to introduce myself. Domino Hurley was busy unpacking one box of his stuff and tossing Lana's stuff into another. When I figured out that he didn't really know about Lana, I told him the story and warned him that he was likely to get some resentment from the others in the office. His only response was, "Hey, that's a shame!"
Then he made some remark about Lana's computer being a piece of crap. I was irked by the fact that he wasn't genuinely listening.
As we talked – or as I talked, and he babbled – I riffled through Domino's box. "Look at all the diplomas!" I said half to myself.
"You have to have the proper attitude to get diplomas like those, Manny."
"Really?" I said in mock astonishment. "I thought you just had to have the proper postage."
Domino wasn't happy with that crack, but I sure was. Having got my lick in, I made my excuses and went to my office to start on the day's cases.

That evening Eva and I met at this new nightclub she wanted to try out. It wasn't exactly my style. I imagined it would have been full of ferns if there were any to be had in the Land of the Dead. The orchestra wasn't half bad, especially if you liked the Kay Kyser sound, which I didn't. Eva was still in a foul mood, but was at least trying to relax. We tried to stay off shop talk, but the shop intruded.
I was doing my best to take her mind off the workday we had just got done with.
"So what are you gonna do this weekend?" I asked her.
She replied with: "Fuck!" and my jaw dropped. She didn't seem to notice my reaction but hissed, "He's here!"
"Huh?"
"Domino! *Don't look!!* " She snapped when I started to turn around.
Maybe he was aware of us the whole time, or maybe I had moved in the right direction. Whichever it was, Domino got up from his table, drink in hand, and sat down at ours.
"Hey kids! How's it goin'?"
"I've been better." Eva growled.
"Something's been eating her all day." He said to me brightly. "Must be that time of the month."
I genuinely winced. Eva was actually speechless.
"Well," Domino went on obliviously. "I've had quite a day myself. Man! I can't believe what a mess that Laura left in my office!"
"Lana!" Eva snapped.
"Oh?" He said indifferently. "I guess I heard it wrong, then." Domino leaned back in his chair and looked over at the band. He hefted his ridiculous drink with an umbrella in it and said to me: "This is the life, ain't it Cally?"
"Last time I checked," I said, "we were all dead."
"Oh, Manny!" Domino exclaimed. "Where's all your optimism?"

I opened my mouth to ask something about what the hell difference could optimism make, but Domino turned to Eva and spoke up.

"So I guess you guys are some kind of an item, huh?"

"Sure, Dom." Eva said tiredly. "Whatever."

"Say, that's terrific! Tell me, Cally –" Domino said, switching tracks yet again. "How many Double-N tickets can a guy expect to sell around here?"

I thought of saying something like, "I don't know, Dommy. How many Double-Ns came with your Monopoly set?" But instead, I shrugged and replied with, "Depends – If you're lucky, maybe five or six a month. Two is more likely though."

"Now is that the winning attitude?" He chided me.

"Saints don't grow on trees, Hurley." I said.

He just waved that aside and sipped his drink. I'd had enough of the guy.

"What did you do to get this job?" I asked. Eva stared at me.

"You mean, what's my secret to success?" He asked smugly.

"No…" I said, getting a little annoyed. "I mean how did you screw up and get stuck at the DOD?"

Domino slowly put his drink down. 'Good,' I thought. 'I'm getting to him.'

"What sin did you commit, and how long are you going to have to work here to pay it off?" I went on.

"I could easily ask the same question of you." He said coldly.

I should have expected that one, but I was thrown. "But I don't know the answer." I admitted. "I still don't know what I've done."

"Well, how convenient!" He sneered. "Then neither do I." And having got the last jab, he finally left us.

"Oh, good going Manny." Eva said with only mild sarcasm. "What made you ask such an asinine question? Who's always saying there are questions we don't ask, anyway?"

That made me defensive. "Look, I wanted to get rid of him, Okay? I really can't stand that guy!"

"And you think *I'm* in love with him?" Eva shot back at me and shook her head. "Listen, darling – I wanted to get rid of him too, but don't you think there was a more grown-up way of doing it?"

"Well you were pretty quiet back there. Didn't you have anything to contribute? Just how would *you* have gotten rid of him?"

Eva opened her mouth and then closed it. She looked down at the table.

"I don't know, I guess." She shrugged and looked back up at me. "I just wish you weren't so nasty about it, that's all. I shouldn't criticize when I don't have any better ideas, should I?" She asked wryly.

"Who else cares enough to keep me on the straight-and-narrow?"

Eva patted my hand. "Now don't get mushy on me, sweetie."

We got off the Domino subject after that. But he didn't just disappear, unfortunately.

Chapter 3 – Manny's Mojo Cops a Breeze

Over the next couple of weeks, Domino kept getting on everyone's nerves until Apollo popped off with that complaint and ended up leaving town. Just before he left though, he had an idiotic physical confrontation with Domino. Apollo was definitely taken to the cleaners. Hurley was a big guy – he could have been a linebacker or something. He was a jock of some kind, anyway. It seemed that whenever he wasn't on a case he was stripped down to his undershirt and shadowboxing, or skipping rope, or doing push-ups in his office – like he couldn't take sitting still.
'The Sweatiest Man in the Office' I dubbed him.
"You gotta sweat to sell, Cally, and you know it." He'd say to me, even though I was a couple of years more experienced of a salesman than him. He *really* started to get to me. What made it worse was the fact that he *was* selling. A lot.

It isn't easy to be a sales agent. It's not as simple as 'Good life = Premium Sale'. An agent has to put all the pieces of a life together and search out the absolute best package a soul deserves, and then convince the client to buy. It takes experience to do that well. Hurley claimed it was all a matter of 'the winning attitude'. A load of crap, I thought – but he *was* selling a lot of premium packages for a beginner. Actually, he was selling a lot for a veteran. Hurley got to me for another reason: I started to have a slump. There's always an ebb and flow in clientele cases. You can't pick and choose your clients. Sometimes there's a nice mix, sometimes you get a parade of SS officers and child molesters… or if you're very lucky, two Double-N sales in a single week. But for some reason I didn't understand, my clients started to slide toward the telemarketer end of the scale – and all this was while Domino Hurley was raking in premium sale after premium sale. I became as green as Eva's lunches.
Copal suddenly became 'helpful'. He gave me these little pep-talks and motivational sales books with titles like '*They Bought the Farm, Now Sell Them the Cows*'. For a little while I actually thought Copal had changed, but then he suggested I get tips from Hurley. From that moment, Domino Hurley became my archenemy.

At that year's Christmas party I got a little stiffer than I should have, and I really told Hurley off. I guess I made something of a scene because the next day Eva asked me what the hell I was thinking. I was too hazy on the details to have a good answer.
Then came the terrible week when I made no premium sales of any kind. 'Okay,' I thought, 'that's as bad as it can get.' But the next week was worse. I couldn't even sell anything as good as a bus ride. Copal started shouting again and this time he seemed justified. I felt so low I actually started reading the books he had given me. The following week I was able to put someone on a bus, and I thought the slump was ending. But I was wrong.

"What the hell's wrong with me?" I asked Eva over lunch when the nightmare was in its second month. "How can I get a lead on a good client?"

"Sweetie…" she said. "I may send out the work orders, but I don't pick who gets them. I just drop them in the tube and the dispatcher sorts them out."

"Can't you walk a good case over to me?"

"I don't look inside, Cal. They all look the same to me." She gave me an arch look. "Kind of like you guys. And besides, you read that memo Copal sent out, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah." I did my best Copal impression: "'Swapping, selling, and especially *stealing* work orders will result in SEVERE disciplinary action!' I almost think that was aimed at me."

"Well, maybe it was."

"Don't you think I'm paranoid enough?"

"It's not paranoia if they really *are* out to get you, darling."

I thought Eva was nuts and told her so, but after we got back I decided she was a prophet. I walked into my office only to find Domino moving in.

"*What the hell are you doing!?!"* I exclaimed, even though it was pretty darn obvious what he was doing.

"Oh, Cally..." Domino said in a tone usually reserved by parents for use with a slow child. "Do I really have to connect the dots for you?"

I looked around. None of my stuff was in sight and Hurley had already had his punching bag fixed to one wall.

"This used to be MY office!" I said, still in painfully-obvious mode.

"Yeah, I know." He replied, as he made a show of making sure his diplomas were hung squarely. "I found some comic books in the desk with your name on them."

For the record, I never had any comic books. Not in my desk, anyway.

I thrust my face into Hurley's… sort of… and tried to be as menacing as I could.

"I want my office back!"

"Don't worry." He said in a soothing tone that only made me angrier. "You'll have years and years to enjoy it after I've been promoted out, and you're still here."

"I wanna punch you in the mouth."

"Oh, no! Not the Christmas party all over again." He shook his head as if very disappointed in me.

"What… happened at the Christmas party?" I was genuinely baffled.

"Blacked out on the whole thing, huh? Maybe you should switch to lemonade, kid."

I went to the door, and then turned back. "Is it hard to kiss up to the boss when you've got no lips?" I sneered.

Domino's voice was soft and cold. "I got all the lip I need. I get it from you."

I left. Eva was standing just outside. "Manny…" she said quietly and beckoned for me to follow.

She led me to the store room – Apollo's old office. My name was on the door.

"There's a hold on Domino's old office. Copal says you're in here now."

"Did you know about this?"

She shook her head.

"I feel like dirt." I sighed.

"Me too, sweetheart."

"Well, there's one thing good about all this."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I can't sink any lower."

Year One

Chapter 4 – Sinking Lower

Hitting rock bottom doesn't mean you'll start rising again, I found. Months went by and still I had no premium sales. This meant, of course, that I was working… but not working off my time. I began to hate going into the office. It was hard to face my clients, to go through my spiel knowing it wouldn't lead to anything. I'd send them into my crummy little office and make any kind of excuse so I could close the door behind them and take time to get my nerve up. And the time I made my clients wait kept getting longer and longer. One of my last clients, Celso Flores, had to wait for me almost an hour.
Eva stared sadly at me from her desk by Copal's office as I paced outside my door, bundling up what little courage I had left.
Finally, I opened the door to face him.

Celso was huddled in the chair by the cheap table I used as a desk, chain smoking.
"Sorry for the wait, Mr. Flores." I said, sweeping into the office in my robes, surreptitiously using my scythe to keep my balance. "I'm ready to take you now."
That was the wrong way to put it. Celso's foot started tapping the floor while he tried to become one with his chair.
"Take me? Take me where?" He squeaked.
"Now, now." I tried to soothe him. "There's no need to be nervous."
Celso made an effort to get the compulsive tapping under control.
"Nervous? N-no… it's just your appearance. It's… well, it's a little intimidating."
"Intimidating? Me?" I almost laughed. "But I'm your friend. My name's Manny Calavera. I'm your new travel agent."
"I just want to go home." Celso said in a small voice.
I'm sorry to say I did chuckle then. "You can't go home, Celso – You're dead."
Celso's tapping stopped, and he sagged as if his strings had been cut.
"But, you're not alone." I continued. "Everybody here is just as dead as you! That's why we call it the Land of the Dead." I put my scythe aside and carefully sat down. Even after all this time with my height extenders, I still had trouble judging how far it was to the chair.
"Are you ready for your big journey?"
"*No!*" Celso practically jumped out of his chair with the intensity of his denial, but just as quickly he slumped back again. "What journey?" He asked helplessly.
"The four-year journey of the soul!" I tried to say enthusiastically. "It's quite a big trip, and I can't lie to you, Celso – it can be very, very dangerous."
Celso looked almost ready to bolt. "Unless… you take that money you were buried with, and buy a better travel package from us!"

I spread some brochures out on the table even though I knew it was pointless.

"Wouldn't you rather travel the Land of the Dead in your own sports car? Maybe try a luxury ocean cruise? Or, if you've lived a very good life…" I said through gritted teeth. "You may even be eligible for a ticket on the Number Nine train itself!"

A little voice in my mind started frantically going: 'No-no-no-no!' as Celso picked up the last brochure.

"The Number Nine?" he asked hopefully.

I sighed a little. "That's our top-of-the-line express train. It shoots straight to the Land of Eternal Rest in four days instead of four years. But…" I continued emphatically. "Very few people qualify. Let's take a look at your record."

I turned toward my computer and brought up Celso's file. No surprises. He wasn't a bad man in the typical living-person's sense, but he had missed almost every opportunity for true virtue. I turned back to find Celso engrossed in the Number Nine brochure.

"Well…" I said gently. "It looks like the train is just out of your reach." I said as I turned back to the computer. "But I still have a couple of tricks up my sleeve."

I worked a few minutes with Celso not-breathing down my neck as I stretched every point in his favour to breaking point.

"Ah-ha!" I said eventually. "That's the ticket: The Excelsior line!"

I collected my scythe and took Celso down to street level. I made him wait outside while I had a demon fetch an 'Excelsior'. Then I gathered myself and went back out to Celso, where he waited on the massive steps that led to the main doors. I held it out to him – a walking stick with a gold-plated handle.

"Isn't she a beauty?" I said half-heartedly. Celso took it numbly while I went on. "That compass in the handle will sure come in handy, too."

He looked open-jawed at the compass set into the knob of the stick.

"Oh, you're going to have a great trip, Mr. Flores! Wish I was going!"

At least THAT part was truthful.

"Why don't you?" Celso asked a little forlornly. "You could give me a lift."

I couldn't bring myself to make 'eye' contact. "Oh, I can't leave here until I pay off a little debt to the 'Powers that Be'."

"Community service, eh? Well," he said almost brightly, "I guess there are some folks worse off than me."

With that, he turned away and started down the steps.

"Oh, I'll be leaving here soon enough!" I called out after him. Then, under my breath, as I turned to go back inside, I muttered, "No thanks to dead-end, no-commission, low-life cases like yours, *menso.*"

I rode the elevator back to my floor and started trudging to my office.

"Manny," Eva called out to me. "Copal told me to tell you not to leave early today. He wants to talk to you about something."

"Tell him not to worry…" I said grimly. "I'm not going anywhere."

Back in my office, I took off my robe and kicked the high-lift things off my feet.

"Especially not with clients like that!" I continued to myself as I extracted a bottle of scotch from my now-empty premium-clients file cabinet and took a hefty swig. "Where do they get these guys? They don't qualify for anything good, so I can't sell them anything good!" I took another long drink from the bottle. "So I can't work off my time, and I'm stuck!" I cracked my hand heavily onto my so-called desk. "Stuck selling walking sticks to a bunch of *burros* for eternity!"

I shakily went to the window to peer through the blinds at the busy-street far below.

"I need better clients." I said hoarsely. "I need a real saint. I need a lead on a rich, dead saint."

I sighed and leaned against the window, waiting for Copal to come in and chew me out again.

Chapter 5 – Day of the Dead and Bad Gazpacho

Needing and getting are two different things, particularly when everything seemed to be against me. The system was supposed to work in such a way that I'd earn off my time eventually. Client assignments were completely random. Statistically, one agent was just as likely as another to make premium sales. This was the system I had been working in and, up until now, it had been working great. I decided to go by the rules when I first began working for the DOD and I stuck to the rules even when the DOD stopped holding up its end. Eventually though, I started breaking the rules. And once I started, I broke a lot of them very quickly.

I came into the office late one morning. I had been getting into that habit lately. This morning though, the place seemed deserted. Even Eva wasn't at her desk; but I did see Copal's door open a crack, so I figured she must have been in there. When I got to my office I noticed that the flag was up on my message tube. I was surprised, and a little hopeful, when I saw that it wasn't the standard work order.

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To: All agents
From: Office Manager Don Copal

All right you boneheads, thank your lucky stars
and get to your frigging cars!
We have a MASS POISONING on our hands! Too many
dead to assign specific cases, so all clients are
FIRST COME, FIRST SERVE!
So let's see some hustle out there!
```

I don't think Copal knew what a full-stop was.
I sighed and stuffed the memo hastily in my pocket. 'Well *jefe*,' I thought, 'if I do badly on this one at least I'll know who's to blame.'
I gathered my cloak and the things for my shoes and headed out. My scythe I always kept collapsed next to where my heart used to be.

Eva was back at her desk by the time I left my office.
"*Buenos Dias.*" I said.
"Manny?" She said, looking a little puzzled. She hadn't seen me come in, of course. "Why aren't you aren't you at the poisoning?"
I decided to have a little fun. "What poisoning?"
I imagined Eva would have rolled her eyes if she had any. "Yeah! The code-three gazpacho poisoning that everybody's at, except you! Why do I send out memos if nobody reads them?"
I had a little chuckle in me for that. I perched myself on the edge of her desk for the rest of our game.
"Any messages for me?"
"I only have one other message for you, Manny: *I'm not your secretary! I don't take your messages! So get it through your thick skull and stop forwarding your phone to me!!* "
Her wise-crack was so funny I literally fell off the desk.
"In my heart though," I said as I picked myself up off the floor, "you're still my secretary."
She looked down at me. "Manny, what are you talking about? I was *never* your secretary, even when you were on top. I got one boss, same as you: Don Copal." She mimed spitting the taste of his name out of her mouth. Quite a trick, really – especially when you've got no tongue or lips.
"Come on," I teased. "I know you work for another man besides Don."
Eva seemed completely thrown for a second. "Wha… what are you talking about?"
"I know you take memos for Hurley sometimes."
She bounced a pencil off my skull and seemed to relax. "Ah Manny, just beat it, will ya?"
I sat back down on her desk, making a show of dusting off the edge first.
"So," I said, lighting a cigarette. "Where is everybody today?" I asked.
Eva gave me the patented 'are you nuts?' look. "Did you forget what day it is today?"
"Oh, man!" I jumped up. "Did I come in on Saturday again?"
"It's the Day of the Dead!" Eva exclaimed. "Everybody's back in the Land of the Living, visiting their families like we should be."
I probably knew that already, but wanted to forget. I never really cared much about the Day of the Dead, though. More of a living-person's holiday, I thought (however ironically).
"So why aren't you visiting your family today?" I asked.
Eva shrugged. "The boss is here, so I gotta be here. How about you, Cal?"
"No one back there I want to see."

Eva looked slyly at me. "And you don't want Domino here alone, getting all the good leads."

"Domino's *here!?*"

"He's at the poisoning." She cooed sweetly. "Stealing your commission."

"Well," I said, quickly stubbing out my cigarette. "I gotta go hit the bricks."

"Okay." Eva said dismissively as I ran to the elevator. "You go show those bricks a lesson."

When I got down to the garage, Endive was nowhere to be seen. He usually had the car waiting for me. Actually, he *always* had the car waiting for me. I looked every place I could think of, found nothing, and then went back to the elevator to use the phone that hung beside it. I called up Eva.

"I can't find my driver!"

"Do you want me to page him?" She replied sarcastically. I was too agitated about the poisoning, Domino, and my missing driver to notice the tone of her voice.

"Yes!" I said.

"Then get Don to stop being such a cheapskate and install a paging system."

Yeah, I walked right into that one. I knew we didn't have a paging system.

"You'll just have to troll the garage until you find a demon with a driver's license. Sorry."

"Okay, Eva." I said and hung up. So I started prowling around some more, ending up in a far corner of the garage I'd never been to before. I found a small shack surrounded by spare tires, automotive parts and rusty tool cabinets. I could see movement through the single dirty window built into the shack. I knocked on the door and got no answer. Being slightly impatient, I whacked the door with my open hand and shouted: "Hey! Service!"

"Who the…?" A rough voice barked as the door crashed open. I began to regret my impatience when its owner came out. The biggest, most orange demon in blue overalls I'd ever seen squeezed his massive bulk through the door. The look on his face made me think that a wild demon had somehow gotten into the city, but then his snarl was suddenly replaced by a kind of sheepish, puppy-dog look.

"Oh, sorry sir." He said. "I didn't…" he stopped and put his massive hands on his hips. "Sales agents don't usually come over to *this* part of the garage!" he exclaimed.

"I'm Calavera." I said, craning my neck up at the monster. He had to be at least ten feet from his toes to the tips of the little ears perched on top of his head. "Manny Calavera."

"My name's Glottis." He said. His jaws were so large I could have easily jumped through his smile with a clear foot on either side. "I don't get many visitors." He suddenly jerked himself even taller and I nearly bolted. "Hey! I got a message for a Mr. Calavera!" Glottis scratched his head. "Uh… your driver said… that Mr. Hurley said… that he could take the rest of the day off!" I was well and truly floored. "Domino sent my driver *home?*" What the hell was going on?

"Yeah!" Glottis beamed, completely blind to my agitation. "Wasn't that nice?"
I shook my head and sighed. "Looks like I need a new driver."
For a second, I thought Glottis was going to bounce off the ceiling. "*Oh!!*" he blurted in a kind of bass-squeal. "I, uh… I…" he regained some kind of control over himself and went on in an exaggeratedly nonchalant tone. "Uh… I would agree with that. Yes," he nodded solemnly, "you do."
Well, it was pretty easy to guess what Glottis was so excited about.
"You want to be my replacement driver?" I asked.
"*Me!?*" he said in that same weird squeal. "No, sorry. I can't. Rules." He said bitterly.
"Come on, Glottis." I urged. "I need you to be my driver."
"No, I can't." He whined. "I'm… I'm…" he turned away from me and looked down at his enormous hands. "I'm… too big."
It was so ludicrous it was nearly hysterical, but Glottis was obviously pained by what he was saying. I didn't have to try very hard to keep the laughter down. "You're not too big!" I tried to sound sincere. "You're just right!"
"No…" he said miserably. "They told me again and *again*. I'm too big to drive." He sounded like he was about to cry.
"Well," I said helplessly, "isn't there anything here big enough for you?"
"No." Glottis sniffled. "Only those *dang* compact cars." But then, almost instantly, he perked up again. "Hey! That gives me an idea!"
His face scrunched up as if his brain hurt to work properly. "I could alter your car just a bit… with just a quick torch-job to let out the seams, you know?"
But as quickly as his spirits rose, they plummeted again. "Oh, but I'm not allowed to modify the cars without a work-order from upstairs!"
"A work order, huh?"
"Yeah…" Glottis said miserably. He pulled a scrap of paper from one of his pockets and showed it to me. "I can't torch anything bigger than a cigarette without one of these signed by your boss."
I snatched the form from Glottis before he could stuff it back into his pocket.
"Hey, that's my line: Getting people to sign. Be back in a snap!"
Glottis beamed with that huge smile of his as I trotted back towards the elevator.
"Yeah, too small!" I heard him saying. "I'm not too big! Everything around here is just too small!"
I laughed quietly at that moment.

I raced back up to the office and headed for Copal's door. Another pencil bounced off my skull before I opened it.
"Big mister boss man doesn't want to be disturbed today." Eva said.
"Eva, I really need Copal to sign this work order!" I pleaded.
She shrugged. "I'll give it a shot." She turned to the intercom box. "Mr. Copal? Mr. Calavera has something out here he needs your signature on…?"
"Ah, cripes, Eva!" Copal shouted. His voice was just as clear through his office door as it was from the speaker. "Just sign it yourself, will ya? I'm busy!"

"You'll have to excuse him, Manny." Eva said tiredly as I handed her the work order. "It's probably a really hard crossword puzzle he's got in there today."

"Eva, I'm impressed! I had no idea you had this kind of power!"

"Well, we all have our secrets. What's it about, anyway?"

"Domino sent my driver home, and the only demon I can find is a mountain. I think the only way he's going to fit in my car is to do a chop job."

"How is he going to do that?" Eva asked sceptically.

I shrugged. "I guess he's a mechanic. He's dressed like one."

"Sweetie," Eva said earnestly, "if he's a mechanic he *won't* have a company driver's license. You know the rules."

"Screw the rules!" I growled in and irritated way and left Eva staring after me as I stomped back to the elevator.

I got the work order back to Glottis and he started working on my car. I wasn't sure that Glottis was up to the job, even if he WAS obviously the guy who kept all our cars running – he seemed kind of dizzy – but I started to relax once he got going. Glottis may have had hands like sides of beef and a brain the size of a pea, but he was nimble, quick and efficient. I hung around, lighting a cigarette and waiting for him to finish; I didn't have anywhere else to be and he was moving pretty fast. I made a tour of Glottis' domain.

"Nice hut." I remarked, looking into the little shack where I had found him.

"Yeah?" Glottis asked as he cut through my car's roof with a blowtorch. "I wonder how nice it would seem to you if you were trapped in it all day like me."

"If you hate your job, why don't you quit?"

"It's not just a job, Manny. It's what I was created to do." He put the blowtorch down and ripped the top off the car with ease. "If I get anywhere farther away from cars than this," he went on, "I'll get sick and die. It's like… it's like I'm not happy unless I'm breathing in the thick, black, nauseating fumes."

I blew a single smoke ring from my cigarette while I thought about that.

"Can't imagine." I finally said.

"Hey, Manny," Glottis said as he started filing the edges of the hole he had made. "I don't want to butt into your affairs, you being a big-shot sales agent and all, but that *is* a gasoline pump you're leaning on."

"*Ay Chihuahua!* " I exclaimed as I quickly stamped out the cigarette.

Glottis finished up on the car and started to wedge himself into the roof-hole while I got my gear on. When I was done I turned to see Glottis looking at himself in the side mirror.

"Hey, I look good in this, don't I?"

I thought he looked idiotic – like a basketball at a tennis game. Still, I replied with: "Yeah, well, they say black is slimming."

I got in the car as Glottis reached in through the driver's-side window and started the engine. The car lurched forward while I had one foot still on the ground. I fell back in the seat as the car jerked towards the exit to the Limbo Highway that connected the Land of the Living with the Land of the Dead.

"Oh, great!" I thought. "He's never driven before!"

"I'm drivin'!" Glottis crowed, as if I needed the confirmation. "Yeah!! I'm drivin'!"

"*Por favor!*" I muttered as we made our halting way along the dark, misty road. "I could've walked faster than this!"

Eventually we got to our destination in some city. I never bothered to know where these places were. I shuddered a little when we entered the Land of the Living – it always gave me the creeps. When we die, the Land of the Living appears *much* differently than it does when we're alive. Trust me, the less I tell you about it, the better.

As we pulled up to the diner where I hoped to pick up a client, another DOD car pulled away. Two souls sat in the back. One waved to me.

"Domino!" I hissed through clenched teeth.

Glottis brought the car to a lurching stop. I waited a few seconds for any more sudden movements before getting out. I slipped into the diner and felt a woman standing near the door shudder.

"I know you can't hear me," I whispered in her ear, "but try to feel what I'm about to say deep down in your soul: *Don't eat the gazpacho!*"

Fun's fun, but I had work to do. I found one last soul left in the diner, lying on the floor, perfectly still, and swathed in thick cords – the 'mortal coil'. With a practiced flick of my wrist I let my scythe unfold and lock open. I sliced through the cords with exercised precision and the soul sat up.

"Nice bathrobe." The man, who was a midget, sneered.

"Name?" I sighed.

"You first." The man snapped as he stood up.

"Manny Calavera."

"Okay Calavera, I'm Bruno. Bruno Martinez."

"Well Bruno, I've got a car outside, so if—"

"Where the hell are we going?" He demanded.

"Mr. Martinez." I said gently. "You're dead."

"Yeah," he snapped, "I kinda figured that… what with the cramps, bloody vomit, plague of locusts…"

I felt my shoulders sag. "So you *didn't* have the salmon mousse?"

"No, wise guy. The gazpacho."

"Well, since you ARE dead, Bruno, it's time to leave this world."

"And if I don't wanna?"

"Look at your hands, Bruno." I said very softly.

He did, and jumped when he realized he could see through them.

"What's happenin'!?" He yelped.

"Your time in this world is over." I said. "It's time to move on… or face oblivion."

Bruno started moving toward the door.

"So why can't I see through you?" He demanded.

"I've already left this world for good, even if I do make return trips. I couldn't do my job if I was liable to fade away."

I ushered Bruno into the back of the car as he asked, "So what is your job?"

"To take you from this world and start you on your journey through to the next." I said as I got in after him. I explained everything to him on the trip back (which, thankfully, was much smoother). I finished my spiel just as we pulled back into the garage.

"…but we offer several package upgrades if you'd care to…" I was saying as we climbed out of the car.

"Cut the yap!" Bruno interrupted. "I just want something cheap where I can get some rest, and that's it!"

"Ay, ay, ay…" I said under my breath as Bruno trotted to the elevator.

"You know, Manny…" Glottis was saying. "I could make this car a little faster, if you wanted…"

"Yeah, yeah." I said absently as I followed Bruno. "Whatever."

Glottis started to say something else, but since he sounded happy and apparently wasn't speaking to me, I just tuned him out.

I had Bruno in my office just long enough to determine what package he deserved. Then I led him downstairs to the shipping room and got him into a standard-regulation DOD coffin.

"You'll have plenty of rest this way, Mr. Martinez. And, you'll be safely padded by the foam created when these two chemicals mix, like this."

I took the two hoses dangling from the ceiling and sent a double-stream of foul smelling liquid into the coffin.

"Uh, on second thought…" Bruno said, a little panicked. "I wanna upgrade my package."

I released the hoses. "Sorry Bruno, but you didn't qualify for anything better."

Bad-tempered or not, he did come out better than Celso Flores. The coffin wasn't comfortable, but it was safe.

"But here," I went on, "have this complementary mug!" I held one up that said: 'Today is the first day of the end of your life'.

"No, wait!" He said, fighting to keep me from putting the mug into the coffin. "Can't you find me something where I can at least move my legs?"

"You know I'd like to Bruno, but my boss is a real hard-ass."

I had closed the door when Bruno and I entered the room, and its hinges squeaked loudly – yet somehow I didn't realize Copal had entered until he started shouting at me.

"I gotta be a hard-ass when I've got lazy sickle-wavers like *this* jolly-boy working for me! Manny," he continued in the same derogatory tone, "you couldn't find a sale at a yacht club!"

"I got a sale right here!" I said, as if that would have stopped Copal.

"I'm talking *PREMIUM* sales, Calavera! Like the kind Domino makes!"

And I knew now just what kind of back-stabbing judas Hurley was. I was too angry at having Domino thrown in my face to think before shouting back.

"How the *hell* am I supposed to make premium sales with the scumbag client's you're sending me!?"

I don't think I knew what I said until I heard Bruno's indignant "Hey!!"
Copal overrode whatever Bruno might have said next. "Now you're blaming it on the *clients!?* I've had it with you, Manny! If you haven't bagged a premium before the next sales report comes in, you're *out!* Out on the streets! No job, no way to work off your time! Just your fancy suit and your big smile," he sneered in the cruellest way possible, "and a whole lot of TIME TO KILL!"
He slammed the door heavily behind him.
I turned slowly to see Bruno sitting up in his coffin. "Who're *you* callin' a scumbag??" He asked dangerously. "Why, I oughta—"
At that moment I sent the chemical streams straight into his mouth. He fell gurgling back into the coffin as I filled it with foam, pausing just long enough to throw the mug in. Then I slammed the lid shut and bolted it down tight.

Chapter 6 – Subverting the System

I paced back-and-forth in the elevator during the ride back to the office, trying with futility to calm down.
"I'm sick of waiting around for a good lead!" I muttered to myself. "Like it's just gonna fly in here tied to a brick. It's time to *take* one!"
A larcenous idea began to form in my mind.

"How'd it go?" Eva asked when I got out of the elevator.
"*¡Hijole!* I got a tiny little man with a mean temper and no commission."
"Well," Eva said with a glance towards Copal's door, "at least you don't work for one."
I did the best approximation of a snort that I could manage.
Eva glanced a second time at Copal's door before continuing.
"You're not going to like this, but Don just gave Domino a raise."
"*Por favour!* " I exclaimed, thinking that the timing of that smelled of something more than just coincidence. "Tell me some good news, why don't you?"
"I still love you." Eva said sweetly. And, I dared to think, sincerely.
"You're all I really need, *Belleza*. Is Domino in his office?"
"Yeah." She sounded wary. "What are you planning to do?"
"Nothing physical." I said, moving off to stalk my prey.
"Same old story." Eva sighed.

I looked into my old office to see Domino down to his undershirt (again), working with his punching bag.
"Well, at least you're not hitting the bottle anymore." I jibed.
"Hey, Cally!" Domino said without breaking rhythm. "How ya doin'?"
"What's the big idea, sending my driver home?"
Domino's attention remained solely on the bag. "What can I say? It's a holiday. You weren't here. I thought you were taking the day off like most everyone else. Honest mistake."
Yeah, right.

No need to tell Domino that I forgot it *was* a holiday. Instead I said,

"And have to make up the time this weekend? No thanks."

"Yeah." Domino said, still punching away. "That policy sucks, doesn't it?"

I shrugged even though Domino's back was towards me.

"So, how'd you make out at the poisoning?" I asked.

Domino gave the punching bag a heavy roundhouse punch and turned to face me.

"Well…" he said. "Let's just say that Sister Calabaza has secret passion… for trains."

"You got a NUN?" I said incredulously. That should have been *my* client, damnit.

"Hail, Mary!"

"And you sold her a ticket on the Number Nine train."

"Choo-choo, little buddy!" Domino grinned and turned back to his boxing. I could almost taste his smugness. "Say, how'd you score?"

"I got a nun, too."

Domino laughed. "Bruno's a pretty strange name for a nun, wouldn't you say?"

I don't know how he knew. "Well, you know how cruel sisters can be about nicknames." I said feebly.

Silently, I let out a lengthy sigh. I just couldn't get under his skin – not that he had any. I looked around the office. I hadn't really been in there since Hurley took it over. The wall next to the door was covered with Domino shaking hands with dead celebrities, and a tiny mini-bar had been installed under his plethora of paper-mill diplomas.

"Some salesman." I thought to myself. "He doesn't even hide his booze."

The next part I said out-loud, yet mostly to myself. "But that's some premium-looking scotch."

"Have some, Manny!" Domino chided. I obliged, but as I poured a shot he continued in a more scathing tone. "Just so you don't forget what 'premium' tastes like."

I didn't say anything to that. I just continued my survey. Domino had a message tube like the rest of us, except his was painted red… strange.

The file cabinets were all gone and there wasn't a single scrap of paper on his desk. There was however, a little trophy or something made of a weird-looking rock.

"Why do you get all the good clients?" I asked.

"You're asking the wrong guy." Domino said. "You should be taking a good, long look at the man in the mirror."

"No thanks. I don't enjoy that the same way you do."

Domino just huffed slightly.

I gave the message tube a second look. There was a small padlock on it… very strange.

"I think we should team up." I said to kill some time. "Be partners."

"Oh Manny, I would! But I'm too intimidated. I could never be partners with someone who was so much more of a man than me."

"Oh, come on." I needled. "I've seen your wife."

I'm pretty sure I saw Domino's rhythm falter a little just then. Before he could say anything, I went on. "Hey, I see you finally got that new computer."

"Yeah, all that red tape was a real bitch."

"What's your screensaver password?"

Domino's voice suddenly turned rock-hard. "Get away from my computer, Manny." And then, in a much lighter tone, "My mother's brownie recipe is on that."

"And you don't want me finding out what the 'secret ingredient' is?"

Domino laughed. "Hey, that's pretty good Cally. But I've got a lot of paperwork to catch up on. It looks like this'll be a slow day, so…"

He then stopped boxing and pulled off his gloves. I got the feeling he was getting sick of me.

I'd seen everything I could, anyway.

"Well, you sound pretty out-of-breath, so I'm gonna blow." I said.

"Always a pleasure, Cal." Domino said as I left. He closed the door behind me.

I went back to my office, sat down, and put my feet up on my would-be desk. I stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. Obviously, the idea I came up with in the elevator wasn't going to work. I needed something… sneakier.

If I couldn't lift a case from Domino's office, then I'd have to intercept one before it got to him. That could be tricky. When a person died in the Land of the Living the case was opened by the Bureau of Records downtown. A work order was issued to the Bureau of Acquisitions where it was routed to an office manager, who then routed it to an agent. Unfortunately, I had no contacts in Records. There was nothing I could do as far as Copal was concerned, not without getting Eva involved, and I wasn't prepared to do that. That just left the time when work orders were in transit between Copal and Hurley.

I shook my head. I couldn't get over Domino's office. No paper, no files. A *lock* on his message tube. And why was it red? I lit a cigarette and blew rings at the ceiling. He was definitely up to something… but what? I knocked some ash off the cigarette. He had no files, nothing connected to his job, except maybe on that computer. I noticed it had a scanner. He clearly didn't want to leave a paper trail and I figured it was pretty safe to assume it wasn't just because of a cleanliness fetish. What was he up to?

I sighed. I was just going in circles, and getting suspicious about Domino wouldn't get me any closer to a good case.

Eventually, I stubbed out my cigarette and stood to leave. Suddenly my attention was grabbed by my own message tube. There was nothing special about it – nothing at all. An idea slowly snuck into my mind. I went down to the room deep in the basement where the tube-switcher was located.

"Well, well…" I thought out-loud.

There was another red tube. Interesting, if entirely baffling.

Domino may be the highest flier in the company right now, but why did his message tube need to be distinctive? The only possible answer was to ensure that nothing meant for Domino could accidentally be dropped into the wrong tube.

Could Domino be subverting the system? It would explain my endless slump if he was.
Well, two could play that game, but it turned out not to be that simple. Things are *never* that simple. Brennis, the demon in charge of the tube-switcher, wasn't any help. He was kind of bitter about his existence. Created to run the elevators, the company put Brennis out of *that* job by installing motion detectors. Brennis would thwart you when you had legitimate reasons for doing something, just to spite the company. Never mind *my* reasons for wanting his help. But I found that same resentment could work in my favour.

There had been no tube system when I first went to work for the DOD. Work orders had been routed through the mail room. The demons who worked there weren't happy about the tubes any more than Brennis was about the elevators. The tube switcher wasn't totally reliable, of course; machines break down even in the Land of the Dead, and when the switcher goes down, the mail room demons carry work orders until it's fixed. So I made a deal with the little guys: I'd sabotage the switcher big time, and they would let me have a look at the work orders intended for Domino.
Meanwhile, Glottis was busy working on my car. I remembered that I'd absently told him to make it faster. I didn't want to use Endive for this scheme since he was such a stickler for the rules, so I told Glottis that he needed to make my car as fast as he could and be ready to drive me to the Land of the Living himself. He was the most ecstatic demon in the Land of the Dead.
While Glottis worked, I stashed beer bottles in my office. The demons in the mail room liked beer, and they started liking it even more after the tube system went in. They also liked stuffing their empties down the tubes. They were responsible for more than a few 'unscheduled system improvement opportunities'. Well, I wasn't content to use just empties. I was after the biggest mess I could make. So when Glottis told me the car was finished, I sent two dozen open bottles of stout down my tube. About fifteen minutes later, a happy little demon brought me some work orders. Some were actually for me, others for Domino. None of them seemed promising, especially mine. Half an hour after that another demon came. I scanned the work orders he had for Domino, and one jumped right out at me.
"Mercedes Colomar." I read off. "Client number 9308 – blah, blah, blah… time of death, yadda, yadda yadda… Ah-ha! 'Positive Attributes: Volunteered time reading stories to dying children'! That's good!" I said excitedly, giving the work order back to the demon. "That's *really* good!"
I picked up the phone to call Glottis.
"I think you're it, Mercedes Colomar!" I said as I dialled. "I think you're the one for me!"

After I finished telling Glottis to meet me with the car, I grabbed my gear and rushed out of my office. Unfortunately, I was forced to wait for the garage elevator. Domino had got the work orders while I was on the phone to Glottis. I should have told the mail room demon to wait.
I hastily put my gear on in the elevator after it finally got back to my floor. When the doors opened on the garage level, I hadn't even bothered to put on my height-extenders. I ran out to my car – and stopped dead in my tracks. There in front of me was the biggest, baddest hotrod I'd ever seen.
I used to have dreams about cars like this one all through adolescence. I must have gawked for at least ten critical seconds.

"Glottis!" I exclaimed finally. "Are you *loco*? That was a company car!"

"Oh, yeah!" Glottis crowed. "And it's even better company now! Hop in!" Glottis had so radically rebuilt the car that 'hopping in' meant climbing onto a kind of throne affair perched in the back of the car behind a half-bubble windscreen.

"Are you sure about this, *mano*? I don't want to be blown off!"

"Don't worry, Manny!" Glottis said as he revved the engine. "I tested it out in a wind tunnel! You won't even feel a breeze."

"All right…" I said doubtfully. As I climbed up to the rear of the car I saw the words '*Bone Wagon*' painted on the side. I got into my seat and strapped myself in tightly. "Have you seen Domino?" I asked.

"Yeah, Mr. Hurley drove off a few minutes ago."

"Damn!" I cussed. "I wish I'd gotten to the elevator first! Okay *carnal*, we're going to where Domino is going; only we've got to get there first! And we've got to get there and get away before he arrives. Got it?"

"Got it!" Glottis said confidently. The car's new engine roared into life, and Glottis must have laid an inch of rubber on the cement as we tore out onto the Limbo Highway.

The trip was completely different from the first with Glottis – fast, smooth, cool, and he was right about the windshield. I peered through the gloom ahead, and it wasn't long before I saw twin red lights glowing in the darkness. Glottis raced closer, and for a few seconds I feared he might ram straight into Domino's car. But he did a quick swerve at the last second and we sped past. I twisted myself around just in time to see Domino's car crash into a ditch beside the road and roll heavily onto its side. I wondered if the driver would be all right, but that spill bought me all the time I needed. I hoped.

Soon enough we got to where we were going. Glottis never seemed to slow down as we tore through the streets. I was afraid we'd roll over too, on some corners; but the *Bone Wagon* rode with extreme precision and did everything Glottis asked of it. Within minutes we were gliding up to a hospital. As I hopped down, I turned quickly to Glottis: "Keep her running. I'll be as quick as I can."

I ran into the hospital and forced myself to slow down. I didn't want to get into a rush and lose my way. After all, I had no way then of knowing how close Domino might be. I found my client soon enough and sliced apart the cords that bound her to the Land of the Living.

"*Buenos Dias.*" I said brightly.

Mercedes Colomar looked at me calmly for a second or two. I was slightly struck by the gaze she gave me. Finally she spoke.

"You're not the nurse."

"No." I said.

"You're not here to give me my medication?"

"No, but I am here to ease your pain."

She glanced away from me. "I guess they couldn't save me, huh?"

"No, but there's still a chance *you* could save *me*."

Mercedes looked up quizzically at me, and I held out my hand to help her up.

"It's time to go." I said calmly.

"I guess it is." She said, walking out to the corridor with me. That was a good sign – saints are always ready and fearless.

When we got out to the car she took a step backwards. She looked over to me and said wryly, "Not exactly the fiery chariot I was expecting."

Before I could say anything to that she started to climb up to the passenger seat. "I think I'm going to like this." I heard her say. That was a surprise.

I went over to Glottis. "Head back to the Limbo Highway by a different route." I told him. "We don't want to meet up with Domino."

He nodded.

I climbed up to my seat and spoke to Mercedes.

"We won't be able to talk on the ride back." Not over the roar of the engine and the rushing wind. "But we'll have plenty to discuss back at my office."

"Okay." She said understandingly. "Can I at least know your name now?"

"I'm Manny Calavera. And he's Glottis."

"Hi, Glottis!" Mercedes waved down to him.

He turned back with his signature big grin and replied, "You ready back there, Miss Colomar?"

"And waiting to see what this machine can do!" Mercedes called back.

Glottis' smile only got larger as we tore away from the hospital at top speed. There was no sign of Domino on the trip back to El Marrow.

Chapter 7 – Coaxing Meché

When we pulled back into the garage, Mercedes jumped down and moved to make a fuller inspection of the *Bone Wagon*, but I gently ushered her to the elevator. I directed her to my office and then spoke quietly to Eva.

"Domino back yet?"

"Uh, no…" She seemed confused, and rightfully so.

"Okay." I said. "Keep him away from my office if he does get back."

"Sure, Cal." She said, giving me a questioning look.

I quickly went to my office. I was sure I didn't have much time and I had to explain the situation to Mercedes first.

"Okay," I said when I had gotten her seated by my desk. "I ought to start by telling you that things aren't exactly on the level here."

I could see that my opening was already making her a little agitated.

"What I mean is: I'm not really supposed to be handling your case. But it's very important that I handle it anyway."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mr. Calavera." She said.

"Well, you see…" I said, albeit uncomfortably. "I'm doing this job because I messed up my life. I've got a moral debt to work off. Putting it simply, my job is to help souls get across the Land of the Dead – which is where we are now – to the Land of Eternal Rest. How I do that is by selling souls the best travel packages they deserve. The better a person lived their life, the easier their package will be."

"For example…?" She asked.

"Well, it's kind of complicated." I said. "At one extreme is the worst sort of person, who is left on their own to cross the Land of the Dead on foot, facing all the dangers by themselves. At the other end is a saint, who gets a ticket on the Number Nine train. That person just skips right over the dangers in four days instead of four years."

"I see…" she said, somewhat hesitantly. "So why did you steal *my* case?"

That was good, I thought. A genuine saint was never really conscious of what they were.

"I can't leave the Land of the Dead until I work off that moral debt I mentioned, and I can only do that by earning commissions on premium sales to good souls. But I haven't sold a single premium package for nearly a year. Maybe it's just a granddaddy of a slump, but I found out that Domino Hurley – that's the guy who was assigned your case – stole a case from me. Maybe more than one. I can't let him get away with that – too much is at stake."

"So how will stealing *my* case help you? Isn't that wrong in the Land of the Dead?"

"Of course it's wrong. I'll be disciplined for this but once I authorize the transfer of a ticket to you, it's on my record for good."

I began to get a strong sense of disapproval from her.

"I know, I know – what Hurley did doesn't justify what I'm doing. But one Double-N ticket can wipe *months* off my time."

"I guess you're getting kind of desperate, huh?" She said.

"Yeah." I replied, feeling a little sour. "I was doing premium sales all the time before Hurley turned up. Then he appears, and poof! Look, if you're uncomfortable with this, you can walk out that door and wait for Hurley. But you can help me, if you want. If you let me handle your case, I can make up a lot of what this past year has cost me."
Mercedes thought about it for a while. Finally she said, "You're putting a lot of responsibility on me, Mr. Calavera. What makes you think I've been all that good?"

"Miss Colomar—" I began.

"Meché." She said. "Please."

"Meché. I can see it in your face." Which was true. There is just something about a saint. I turned to my computer. "And in your file." I went on as I pulled her file up. "Where it says you're entitled to a first class ticket to…"
My voice trailed off as I leaned closer to the screen. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. "…nowhere?" I finished limply.

"Did I do something wrong?" Meché asked anxiously.

"Not according to your bio. It was spotless." Then, half to myself, "At least the part I read was."

"I'm not sure I like the implication, Mr. Calavera." She said, a little coldly this time.
I couldn't believe this was happening. I break every rule in the book to steal the case of a saint who in the end turns out to be anything but.

"The only implication here is that I'm fired." I sighed.

"Is it something I did?" I completely missed the tone in her voice.
Maybe I picked up the wrong person. "Are you *sure* you're Mercedes Colomar?" I asked hopefully.

"Yes!" She declared almost instantly. "Or is your organization that inefficient?"
I sighed again. The company never made a mistake on a work order, and I knew that I went to the right place. I must have missed something.

"Is there anything you haven't told me about?" I asked.

"Quite a bit, considering I've told you nothing."
She had a point. What was I overlooking? "Did you kill much when you were alive?"

"Very little." She replied dryly.

"Never kill *anybody*?"
She hung her head and twisted her hands in her lap. My anticipation rose.

"I have to confess…" She said quietly, then looked up at me and said in a solemnly firm tone, "I never killed *anybody*!"
My anticipation fell.

"Did you ever cheat on your taxes?"
She sighed. "I've never paid taxes in my life." She admitted. Before I could say anything to that, she continued. "I've never made enough money to be taxed. You know, it's mostly been all volunteer work."
I groused slightly and Meché looked away.

"Were you mean to animals?" I then asked.
"Oh, *no!* " She protested cheerfully. "I love animals! Once, when I was volunteering at an animal shelter, I—"
"Just stop right there!" I said at last. "I give up."
She leaned forward, gently grabbed hold of my sleeve and said, "Don't say that, Manny!"
I pulled away and stood up.
"You know what I have to do? I just have to go and straighten this whole mess out."
I only half-noticed that Meché pulled her legs under the chair and folded her hands in her lap. "Sorry to be so much trouble, Mr. Calavera…" she said softly.
"It's no trouble." I said as I went to leave my office. "But please, call me Manny."

I closed the door and walked quickly over to Eva.
"I need help." I said.
"With that woman you brought in?"
"Yeah. The work order said she's supposed to be a complete saint, but you wouldn't know it from her file."
"That's pretty strange, Cal."
"Tell me about it. Look, maybe Records fouled up somewhere. I can't—"
I suddenly heard a sound and turned to see Copal's door flying open with a loud crash. That was the first time I ever saw him coming.
"Hey, Funny Bones!" he shouted menacingly. "In my office! *NOW!* "
I went in with a brief glance back toward Eva. She was picking up her phone.

Domino was standing in front of Copal's desk. A smirk radiated out from his face.
"Domino has just told me a story." Copal said. "Let me see if I've got it straight." He thrust a finger straight at me. "You *vandalized* company property in order to obtain *confidential information* so you could take your *illegally-modified* car and your *unlicensed driver* and run Domino here off the road! And all in order to steal a client from her *legitimate agent!* Did I leave anything out?" He asked Domino, who shook his ever-grinning head.
"There's nothing legitimate about this place!" I protested. If I was going to be canned, I might as well go down fighting. "You give all the good cases to Domino!"
"Oh, Manny!" Domino exclaimed. "Now I'm embarrassed for you!"
"You've embarrassed the whole office!" Copal snapped at me. "I'm going to call the woman in here so you can apologize to her yourself."
He punched the intercom button. "Eva! Send in Miss Colomar!"
"She already left, sir." Eva replied. "She said she had a long walk ahead of her and she wanted to get started."
"*WALKING!?!* " Copal nearly shrieked as he jerked his finger off the intercom button like it were red-hot, sounding more panicked than angry. "She had a ticket on the Number Nine!" He shouted at me. "Why does she think she has to *walk?!* "

"That's the best package I could find for her." I admitted weakly. Domino started to laugh out-loud.
Copal began to rub his temples. "That woman was a saint, AND a shoe-in for a Double-N ticket that she's not going to get because *you* just couldn't find it! And now," he roared, beginning to bore into me, "because of your little STUNT, she's out *there*, on her own, walking by herself through the Petrified Forest, facing the demons of the underworld alone and unprotected!" Copal's face came within about an inch from my own as he went on shouting.
"*This* is her reward after a lifetime of hardship and public service!?"
For a second I actually thought he was going to slug me. Instead, he turned to Domino and went on. "Makes you sick, doesn't it? Her destiny stolen by this overreaching, has-been salesman looking for a fat commission he doesn't deserve!" Copal sighed heavily and slapped his palm on his face. "You've got a phone call to make." He said to Domino, who nodded smugly and left.

Suddenly, Copal grabbed my arm and pushed me towards his office door after Domino.
"Someone's going to take the fall for this Calavera, and it *AIN'T GONNA BE ME!!*"
He propelled me past Eva's desk and into the elevator. We went down a lot of floors while Copal just glared at me. He was still furious, but he seemed oddly twitchy. I couldn't help but wonder what he meant by me taking a fall and not him. He took me to a storage closet and shoved me inside.
"Get in there and stay put!" He growled as the door slammed shut and locked in my face. I heard him continuing to snarl at someone nearby.
"Hey, you! Make sure he doesn't get out of there!"

Chapter 8 – Come the Revolution

I stood there for a few moments in the darkness, wondering what was going on. I felt sick to the pit of my nonexistent stomach, and listened to the door for any further noise. After Copal's angry stomping faded, I could hear someone moving around.
"Hey!" I called out. "Is anyone out there?"
A soft, low voice answered me. "How's my little Count of Monte Cristo?"
Oh, great. I'll admit now that the deep voice gave me the creeps at first.
"Who's out there?" I demanded, trying to remain assertive.
"I'm you." The voice said. This was getting too weird. "Or rather, I was you… years ago."
So that was it – I was being toyed with.
"Yeah?" I sneered back. "Well, I'M me now, so get lost!"
The voice didn't respond immediately, and for a moment I thought my retort had worked. However when the voice did respond, it sounded thoughtful.
"I see you still have some anger issues, my friend. I'll come back when your head is clearer."

Suddenly I felt a little panic, and realized I didn't want to be left alone.

"Wait!" I said quickly. "What do you think they're going to do to me?"

"I don't want to alarm you, Agent Calavera," which was exactly the wrong thing to say, "but have you ever seen a man sprouted?"

"What do you mean, 'sprouted'?"

"Then you don't know?" The voice asked, sounding surprised. "There's nothing more horrible than the bite of the sprouter. Its deadly stinger spreads a green disease through every calcified pore of your body, leaving you veined with roots and flocked with grass." At that, I began to shiver. "It steadily grows thicker and thicker, until you crash to the ground and bloom out in a horrifying bouquet of pain and fragrant suffering, screaming until your mouth fills with petals and your nostrils shoot out thorny stems – and the bulbs finally flourish through your eyes. This leaves you as nothing but a patch of wildflowers on the ground, swarming with butterflies."

This guy must've been great around a campfire.

"Are you done…?" I eventually asked.

"Yes." The voice answered.

"Then *get me out of here!* "

"The only way out Manuel, is to be taken back in. If you are still truly loyal to this company—"

"Yeah, yeah." I interrupted. "Lay down, roll over and bark the company fight song. Well, get cracked, flunky. The DOD runs a crooked game and I intend to prove it."

If I wasn't stuck in this closet, that is.

"You would do that?" The voice sounded surprised. "That could cause this agency a LOT of trouble."

"I'm gonna blow the lid off this place!" I growled.

"Young man," the voice crowed sharply, "you are an enemy of the Department of Death!"

Suddenly, the door flung open. A very tall man dressed in green fatigues and a beret stood just outside.

"Welcome to the club!" He said with an air of satisfaction.

He gestured me to come out as he looked around cautiously.

"Hurry, Manuel." He said. "We must move quickly."

I walked out of the closet a little unsteadily. Things were changing WAY too fast. Who was this guy? Instead, I merely asked: "Where are you taking me?"

"To the headquarters of the LSA." He replied quietly, but with an air of authority. He then pulled me down the corridor and through a door into the service stairwell.

"LSA?" I asked as we trotted down the steps.

"The 'Lost Souls Alliance'." He answered as he led me out through the garage and across the loading dock. We ducked into the alley between the Acquisitions building and the next one. "We're a small ground Manuel, but we're always on the lookout for new soldiers."

We eventually came to a stop and my rescuer addressed a particular brick on one wall.

"Salvador Limones and guest." He said sternly.

There was an underground rattling sound, and a lift platform suddenly rose up behind us.

"New soldiers to do what, exactly?" I asked as we stepped onto the lift, which then lowered us into the delivery area beneath the alley. The hatch closed over our heads with a loud clang.

"We need help in our intelligence unit." Salvador spoke as we reached the bottom. He led me down a short tunnel and into a small, poorly lit room.

"You know Eva, of course." He said, gesturing to her. I shook my head, wondering if I was seeing things. But there she was, sitting at a small table and working on a broken radio.

"Manny." She said in greeting.

"So, you're not really a secretary?" I asked, feeling completely lost.

"I'm a spy, Manny." She answered.

"Well, that's the last time we use *that* temp agency." I said in disbelief.

Salvador moved to stand beside Eva.

"I was once a reaper like yourself, Manuel." He said. "But I discovered a web of corruption in our beloved Department of Death. I have reason to believe that the Bureau of Acquisitions is cheating the very souls it was chartered to serve."

That got my attention.

"I think someone is robbing these poor, naïve souls of their rightful destinies, leaving them no option but to march on a treacherous trail of tears – unprotected and alone. Like babies, Manuel… like babies." His voice came close to cracking.

He was good. He didn't rant; he just spoke calmly and with no more emotion than needed. He was either totally sincere or the best conman in the Land of the Dead. I was almost persuaded he had something. What he said would really explain a lot, but it was also exactly what I wanted to hear: that my long slump wasn't my fault. It was one thing to expect Domino Hurley, and maybe Copal, too; but Salvador was bringing the entire company into it. It was more than just a little fantastic, and I was determined to be sceptical.

"What's your evidence?" I asked.

Salvador surprised me by replying with, "That's where you come in, Manuel. Or should I call you Agent Calavera?"

"Manny suits me fine." I said. If Salvador had only guesswork, I didn't think I was too interested – even if he WAS the only one on my side. "I'm not looking to join any militant organization, Sal. I just want to work off my time and get out of this dump." I thought I saw Eva shake her head slightly.

"Well," Salvador went on, sounding amused, "you won't even be able to get out of this city without my help. Which means, of course, that you won't be able to find that woman and you'll never get your job back."

I nearly jumped out of my suit. How did he know I was thinking of tracking down Mercedes and using her to expose Hurley's racket? I wasn't even sure that's what I intended until Salvador said what he did. "I think we might be of some use to each other." He finished.

I wasn't the smartest guy who ever died, but I was thinking as fast as I could. Salvador… well, there was something about him – I just didn't know what. He was calm, yet passionate; not dogmatic, but still very sure of himself. He wasn't the sort you usually run into in the Land of the Dead. Guys like him usually have a ticket on the Number Nine. However, this land changes people, and there was just something about him I couldn't place.
And then there was Eva – stubborn, sceptical, and definitely hard-boiled. What was *she* doing with this guy?
I folded my arms and tried to project a 'you have to convince me' look.

"Do you know something *I* don't know?" I asked.

"Haven't you ever wondered why your clients, even your BEST clients, never seem to qualify for the packages you know they deserve?" Salvador asked.

"Yes. My last client in particular: Meché." I shrugged.

"Well, many did qualify, Manuel. Especially *her*. But somehow, somebody with access to their files has stolen their just rewards. Their sweet hereafters."

"Their tickets on the Number Nine?" I asked, suddenly incredulous.

"*Precisamenté, amigo*." Salvador answered.

"What would they do with the tickets?" As far as I knew, a Double-N ticket was as individual as the person it was issued to.

"A ticket on the Number Nine is like a leaf of gold, Manuel. *Especially* to someone who has died with a less-than-perfect record. Someone here is profiting from those who would buy their way into heaven."
I shook my head. What Salvador was saying made absolutely no sense.

"But money's not important here. We all just want out!"
Salvador seemed sincerely amused. "*You* want to get out, Manuel. And so do I, someday. But for some people, this world is all there is."
My thoughts rushed to Domino. He seemed to be enjoying himself in the Land of the Dead, confusing his existence here with life. Salvador continued.

"They have decided to seek pleasure and happiness here in this world; and for that, you need money."
Maybe Sal had a case after all, I thought. I glanced over to Eva, wondering when she started to come over to Salvador's point of view. I then looked back to Salvador and asked, "So who's in on this deal?"

"Don Copal has the access." He pointed out. "He can open any account and transfer the ticket voucher to another. We believe he would then pass the case on to Domino Hurley, who would cover their tracks."

"So that *menso* was getting all the good clients!" I exclaimed, despite my resolution to be sceptical.

"You got some too, Manuel." Salvador said. "You just didn't know it. Domino only got a case if the character of the client was obviously so deserving."

"Like Meché!" I said. The discrepancy between the work order and her file was starting, ever-so-slowly, to make sense. "Do you know who's behind it all?"

Salvador shrugged. "Copal and Hurley couldn't have done it all on their own without help from downtown." He said with a sigh. "But who is ultimately in charge, how many are involved, and how far up in the company the corruption spreads… that is something I don't know. Not yet."
It was my turn to sigh. Salvador was making a very good case. It made sense even if he didn't have all the answers. In a way, that made it much more convincing – a conman would probably have an answer for every little detail.

"What do you want from me?" I asked at last.

"I am going to build an underground army of souls to fight the injustice I have seen in El Marrow." Salvador answered. Then, he became thoughtful and distant. "Communication will become vital as the Lost Souls Alliance spreads out. We'll need messengers we can trust."

"You want me to be your messenger?!" I exclaimed, feeling used.
Salvador started and looked slightly confused. "No, Manuel! Our numbers are small and our agents are far too valuable to risk in that sort of work. History shows only one messenger to be of use to a cause such as ours: carrier pigeons!"
I was getting confused, too. Eva seemed thoroughly amused.

"So, what? Should I grab some pigeons off the roof?" I asked.

"No!" Salvador snapped. "I need to raise then from birth, Agent Calavera. I need their eggs."
I almost broke into laughter. "You spirited me away from Copal because you need pigeon eggs? Have you thought about using messages tied to balloons? I can get you plenty of balloons."

"Manuel," Salvador seemed bewildered now, "what are you talking about?"
Eva started laughing. "Salvador sometimes gets a little distracted." She said to me. She then turned to Salvador. "You were going to tell Manny what we needed from him."

"Yes, of course. Forgive me, Manuel. One thing suggests another, and I'm always planning for the future. But tonight we need you for a very special assignment." Salvador continued in a lowered tone, and led me to one corner of the room where a DOD computer sat. "We salvaged this unit when the company threw it away, but we have yet to get it running."

"This looks like the computer that used to be in my old office." I said. "But I don't know anything about fixing computers, Sal."

"Fortunately I know enough, Manuel. And what I don't know, Eva does. After this unit was removed from Domino Hurley's office, the company removed certain parts – presumably for spares. I have managed to find replacements for all the missing components except for two: the power supply and the network card. Without those the machine is worthless."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Copal isn't in any hurry to replace me." I said. He still hadn't replaced Apollo. "We could probably take what you need from my computer without it being noticed anytime soon."

"My thinking exactly, Manuel." Salvador said. "You and Eva will steal what we need tonight in addition to doing final reconnaissance. With your recruitment, Eva's job in that office is finished. When you return, your most important task will begin."

"Which is…?"

"First, we need access to the DOD network. Only an active agent can give us the access we require."

"They're going to cancel my account sooner or later, Sal." I pointed out. "I can't help you out there forever."

"Don't worry, Cal." Eva said. "We've got that part figured out. You just need to get us in the door."

"Okay." I said. "So what do we do until the office closes?"
Salvador answered. "I will tell you in detail the facts and theories I have collected and developed so far, and we will then discuss the future. I must get the projector. Excuse me."

"Just so long as I don't have to look at your last vacation." I called out after him. I then turned to Eva. "Doesn't Copal wonder where you are?"

"Don and Domino are locked up in Copal's office with some bigwig from downtown – some fatty in a fez. What they think when they come out doesn't interest me."

"Hmm." Salvador spoke mostly to himself as he set up the projector. "Who is the fat man, I wonder? And how does he fit into this sinister puzzle?"

Salvador walked me through everything he had learned and had come to suspect over the years. It was quite a story, but a lot of pieces didn't fit and Salvador admitted it. He hoped that the missing pieces could somehow be dug up from the DOD network. However well these people were covering their tracks, there had to be traces of their activities – something that would identify them. Or so Sal thought, anyway. Beyond that, Salvador hoped to form a system of people who could ferret out and destroy the corruption. He believed the DOD was unable or unwilling to do the job itself. So, as Salvador saw it, the situation demanded a revolution.

Eventually it was time to get moving. It was well past midnight and El Marrow was eerily quiet. Big as it was, the city just didn't have much of a nightlife. Eva got us into the building with her pass key and up to our floor using the service elevator. We saw no one around, but we remained cautious – not even speaking until we got into my office. It looked like a war zone.

"Look at this!" I said, kicking aside papers that had been dumped out of my file cabinets.

"They wanted to know what you had found out." Eva said. "I'm sure they didn't find much."

"Yeah," I replied. "I've been in the dark about a lot of things."
Eva started to work on the computer. I decided now was as good a time as any to question her about the LSA.

"So how long have you been a spy?" I asked.

"Salvador recruited me about a year ago. I couldn't resist him, he's just so… noble!"

"Noble, huh? Well, that explains why I never got anywhere."

"Don't kick yourself around, Manny. You know I'm very fond of you."

I shrugged, when something hit my mind. "A year ago? Then I guess all that stuff about asking questions about Copal…"

"Sal knew we needed an active agent for the cause. I thought you were the best candidate, but cripes on toast, darling! Were you ever dense!"

"Yeah, well, I screwed up my life and decided to be a good little boy in death."

"Not a bad resolution, Cal. Only *they* stopped playing by the rules. They used you to make the scam work, but you wouldn't see it."

"Yeah…" I growled, finally seeing her point. "I was a Grade-A chump. I just couldn't put the pieces together quick enough. Am I that stupid?"

"You bet, sweetie. But seriously, how were you to know? You've had bad slumps before. I tried to make you see this wasn't one of them but I couldn't just blurt it out or I'd blow my cover. If it makes you feel any better Cal, when Salvador wanted to find a new boy, I stuck with you – and you paid off. They started getting greedy and you got mad. You struck back and they got worried… worried enough to want to take you for a ride."

"And now they'll pay."

"Sure they will, but first we've got to get the goods on them." Eva finished up as she removed the network card, put it in a little anti-static bag, and then tucked it into her pocket.

"Why did you take up with Salvador, anyway? And don't say it's because he's noble. Getting mixed up with him is pretty dangerous. The company wasn't involving you in their little game, so why not just work off your time?"

"There's more at stake here than my own fate, darling. If Sal's right, a lot of good people are being cheated out of the destinies they've rightfully earned. You believe in the system, Cal. Do you think that's right?"

"Like hell I do!" I exclaimed. "I'm pretty burned up about this whole thing. Okay, so I admit that up 'til now it's been because *I've* been jerked around, but the thought of Double-N tickets being stolen from the people who truly deserve them just makes me sick."

"Me too, sweetie; and that's why I'm with Sal. The system has to work for everybody or it doesn't work at all. But it's kind of your actions that got me involved in this."

"Really?" I asked, totally surprised. "How's that?"

"Remember my first day, Cal? When you told me that the Land of the Dead could make you go nuts? Well, I don't usually listen to people when they shoot off their faces like that… but I did then. There was something about *how* you said it that made me see you knew what you were talking about. You'd gone through something awful, I thought – something I didn't want to get anywhere near. I couldn't even sleep that night, so I went for a walk and took a really good look at El Marrow. I saw buildings, and cars, and people – just like back home. But the people were dead, and *I* was dead, and things just didn't fit that way."

By this time, she had gotten the power supply out and gave it to me to carry. She then started to close up the computer.

"It's funny, you know. But just when I was thinking how the *appearance* of normality in the Land of the Dead could trip some people up, I saw someone trying to steal a car. It was so *ludicrous*. So when I met Salvador, his suspicions and my attitude just kind of dovetailed." Eva paused for a moment, seemingly in thought. "Come on, we're done here. Let's check out Domino's office!"

"Okay, but we won't find much." I said. Eva got us in with her key. "You won't find any paper in here, either." I added.

"I know." Eva said. "I just want to take a look at his computer."

"Do you know his screensaver password?" I asked, making for the mini-bar and pouring some of Domino's scotch.

"I have a few ideas." Eva said slyly.

"Try 'Arrogant Fraud'." I suggested. Eva just gave me a dirty look and started trying various different passwords. I shrugged indifferently and looked around the office, sipping my drink.

I scratched my skull. There was something odd about the room, but I couldn't make out just what. I watched Eva run through her guesses at the computer and slowly began to realize what was bothering me. It was the rock-thing trophy – or whatever it was – on Domino's desk. It was glowing… pretty brightly, too. I picked it up to get a closer look at it.

"Try 'Hector'." I said.

"What?" Eva asked.

"Look at this." I held out the rock-thing. "The inscription says: '*Congratulations Domino, on your new job! – Hector*'."

"Now you're using your noodle, sweetheart." She said, but then shook her head. "It's not 'Hector' though." She let out a sigh. "Any more ideas?"

"It's not 'Eva', is it?"

"Already tried it."

"Maybe we'd better have luck in Copal's office."

"Alright." She said, giving up on the computer.

We moved to the door, but suddenly Eva stiffened up and grabbed hold of my arm.

"Listen!" She whispered urgently. I could hear it too – movement out in the corridor. It seemed to be coming nearer. "C'mon!" She hissed and pulled me over toward the windows. She quickly opened one up and climbed out onto the ledge. "Quick!" She hissed again. I merely sighed and joined her.

"Maybe I'll make that jump after all…" I thought to myself.

Eva closed the window behind us as we clung tightly to the wall. Slowly, we edged our way toward the alley side of the building.

As we passed Copal's office, the lights flicked on. Fortunately the drapes were drawn, and when there was no sign that they were going to open, we continued on. When we got past and turned into the alley, I wondered out-loud: "Copal putting in a late night?"

"Don't ask me, Cal." Eva answered. "I only work there. Come on… the fire escape is just a little further."

"Yeah." I said, but stopped to get a closer look at something. I chuckled softly to myself, pocketed my find, and caught up with Eva.

We went down a couple of floors and re-entered the main portion of the building, then took the service elevator back down to ground level. We swiftly returned to the LSA headquarters without hesitation.

"Sal, we're back." Eva called out softly. "We've got the power supply and the network card."

"Well done, my friends!" He said approvingly.

I handed Eva the power supply, and then reached into my pocket and held out what I had found on the ledge.

"Check these babies out." I said.

Eva started to laugh while Salvador just stared. In my bony hand I held two tiny pigeon eggs. Finally Sal took the eggs and spoke with ecstatic bravado.

"Excellent, Manuel! With these I can breed an entire army of winged messengers! Our revolution can spread now across the land, carried on the shimmering wings of justice! All of this is thanks to you, Agent Calavera!"

Salvador pulled himself back into reality and spoke to Eva. "But first, the computer."

"Right, Sal." She said, and went briskly to work.

Salvador turned to his projector and placed the eggs near its lamp fan. He then turned to watch Eva, standing still but clenching and relaxing his hands with anticipation as he waited.

Eva finished quickly enough and turned on the computer.

"Okay Cal, we're ready. Just log on like you normally do." She said.

When I did, Eva turned to Salvador. "Okay Sal, time for you to do your part."

Sal took over at the computer and Eva commented darkly. "If this doesn't work, somebody will have a lot to answer for."

Most of what happened next was done in silence – I didn't understand any of it. When Sal was finished with whatever he was doing, he moved away from the computer and asked me to log out, which I did.

Eva folded her arms and released a lengthy sigh. "Well Sal, let's give it a try."

She sat down. Eva began to work the machine, trying to log into the DOD network. After a minute or two of more work, she announced, "Looks like we've got the run of the joint. Unless they know what we're looking for, or we do something stupid and tip our hand by mistake, we'll always have a way in."

"Well done!" Salvador said triumphantly. Then he turned to me. "You are a true friend of the revolution; and now, let me be of service to you."

"Unmarked, non-sequential bills will do just fine, Sal." I said.

He projected a tiny smile. "You must go to the town of Rubacava, immediately. That is, if you wish to find your lost soul." He was of course referring to Meché.

"How do you know where she is?" I asked.

"I don't." Salvador admitted. "But everyone who wishes to get to the Land of Eternal Rest must cross the Sea of Lament, and therefore must go to Rubacava to gain passage on a ship. As long as you get there before she does, you'll find her. But it may be quite a wait."

"I'll wait as long as it takes." I said firmly.

Salvador gave me an appraising look that somehow made me uncomfortable.

"Manuel, are you… in love with her?"

"Love?" I asked incredulously. "Love is for the living, Sal. I'm only after her for one reason – she's my ticket out of here!"

"Well," Eva said, "we'd better get you kitted out." She moved a couple of steps, but turned back to look at Sal. "Sal, someone went into Copal's office while we were leaving. I don't know what that means, but I think we should look into it. Don Copal is *not* a night owl."

"I agree." Salvador said. "We must find out who was in Copal's office at this hour, and why. But please, get Agent Calavera what he needs right away."

"Okay, Sal." Eva said as she left the room.

"You are starting on a perilous journey, my friend." Salvador said while we waited for Eva to get back. "But more is at stake than your own wellbeing. I believe that Mercedes Colomar will be the key to unravelling this mystery, and that our enemy knows this. She must be found at all costs before *they* can find her… and maybe, eliminate her. But remember, my friend: you are an agent of the LSA, and will remain so in Rubacava as well as wherever else you may go. You must remain in contact whenever feasible."

"Right." I said, feeling a little overwhelmed by the pep-talk. "But before the pigeons are ready…?"

"Ordinary letters will suffice. Fortunately, the mail service is staffed by demons and I have no reason to think that they have been corrupted as well. However, please be discreet in your communications."

Eva returned with green fatigues and some survival gear – compass, knife, heavy walking stick, and a backpack among other things.

"Here." She said, giving me the fatigues. "Change into these." When I hesitated, she simply said, "Do you think you've got any bones I haven't seen before?"

I shrugged and started changing.

"Hey, Sal…" She said. Salvador nodded and went to check on the eggs.

"So, sweetheart… I guess this is goodbye." She said quietly.

"I'll be in touch." I said. "You know I have to."

"Yeah, I know Cal. But it won't be the same. Ill miss our lunch dates and everything."

"Sure, Eva. Me too."

I finished changing and shrugged on the pack while I picked up the walking stick. I looked back at Eva and said, "Well, I guess I'm ready."

"Excellent, Manuel." Salvador said, turning back to me at the most inappropriate moment. "I will lead you through a secret tunnel outside of the city."

I nodded and followed Salvador, but turned back when I got to the door.

"Any messages for me?" I asked Eva.

"Yeah…" she said a little hoarsely. "Take care of yourself."

Chapter 9 - The Petrified Forest

As Salvador and I walked along the tunnel, I spoke to him.

"So tell me, Sal: what do you *really* think of your chances for raising an army for revolution?"

"Poor, at present." He admitted. "But I foresee a time when the task may become easier. The activities of this unholy conspiracy that you have witnessed are far more overt than those which first awakened my suspicions. I believe that their past success in keeping their doings a secret has emboldened them. If their activities become more open, as I believe they will, they will disgust many souls. When that happens, the LSA will be ready to make use of their outrage and turn it against our enemies."

"That could take a while." I said.

"It has already taken a great while, my friend." Salvador said. "But now we are able to truly take our first step, thanks to you."

I laughed a little. "Don't build me up too much, Sal. I only helped steal some computer gear and two pigeon eggs."

"Don't be deceived by the scale of your actions, Manuel – but envision the consequences. As a reaper, you must have learned how small actions may have greater outcomes. Yes, you committed petty thievery, but by that act you opened a door to knowledge. Knowledge is power; power sufficient, I hope, to destroy the corruption at work inside the Department of Death. With such an end in view, why should I not build you up?"

"Okay, Sal." I said, giving up. "You're a bigger thinker than I am."

Salvador shrugged. "Perhaps, but not much of a doer. Eva's focus will make action possible."

"Yin and Yang, huh?"

"*Precisamenté*. Only in this case it is the female which is the active principle."

"Are *you* in love with *her*?" I asked, turning Sal's logic back on him.

Salvador said nothing. Not straight away, at least. When he did reply, it was with: "We're here."

The tunnel came to an end with a ladder running up the wall into the gloom.

"At the top you will find yourself at the edge of the Petrified Forest. If you strike out northwest, you will find a road to Rubacava. Send word to us when you arrive."

"Alright, Sal." I said. "You'll hear from me as soon as I get there. And as soon as I find Meché."

"Good luck, Manuel." He said, shaking my hand firmly. "And remember: *Viva la Revolución* !"

With that, he turned his back and quickly disappeared back down the tunnel.

I climbed the ladder and came out of a hollow tree trunk. I dropped to the ground, and turned around to see El Marrow glowing on the horizon.

"Some tunnel." I said to myself, quite impressed. After a moment of gazing, I checked my compass and headed northwest.

After only a few short yards, I heard something. I stopped to listen. It was very faint, whatever it was. I continued on again, but the sound grew louder. It was some kind of unearthly wailing. I stopped again, pulling out the large knife that Eva stashed in my pack, and resumed walking. Before long I came to an enormous, fallen trunk. I cautiously edged around it and saw a large tire.
I shook my head and moved a little farther forward to where I could clearly make out the rear of the *Bone Wagon*. After moving a little closer, I saw a familiar orange mountain of mass lying on the ground near the car.
"Glottis, my friend!" I called out over the sound of his weeping. "Why are you crying?"
Glottis sat up a little. "Manny?" he said in surprise. But then, almost instantly, he began wailing again. "Oh, Manny… they fired me!"
"Me too, buddy." I said, even thought that hardly did it justice.
"You don't understand, Manny!" he wailed. "I was created just to do that job! It was the *only* thing that made me happy! It's like they reached into my chest," suddenly, Glottis thrust his huge hand deep into his own chest, "and pulled out my heart," I let out a cry of shock terror as Glottis ripped his heart out of his chest right before my eyes, "and threw it into the woods!" Glottis continued to speak as he threw his still-beating heart over his shoulder. He must have stood there with his little ears twitching furtively for several seconds, before finally toppling over with a resounding crash.
"Glottis!!" I yelled, unable to believe what I had just seen. "Glottis… what have you done to yourself?"
Naturally, he didn't answer.
"Oh, Glottis…" I said with a sad sigh.
Then, I almost leapt into the air when he suddenly snored loudly.
I took a closer look at him. He was still breathing, somehow – but there was an immense hole in his chest where I could clearly see several arteries and veins still writing around.
"They're not supposed to do that… are they?" I asked myself. But then, Glottis was a demon. I didn't know what was normal with him. He snored again. "How long can he live without a heart…?"
I decided it was best not to find out.

I trotted in the direction of where Glottis threw his heart – and then, quickly stopped. "Oh, ick!" I exclaimed at the sight of several demon spiders fighting over the ever-beating heart. "*Shoo!* " I shouted.
I reached down and grabbed something off the ground to throw at them, but froze when I saw it was a human bone. There were quite a few human bones littering this area.
"Could this be Lana's…?" I thought. I shook my head to clear it of the disturbing image, and hurled the bone at the eight-legged demons.
One of the spiders launched itself at me. I beat it off with my walking stick. Some of the others turned toward me. I didn't see much of a way out.
"*Yaaaah!!* " I screamed out as I rushed them, wildly swinging the stick.
I quickly grabbed the heart and ran away at top-speed. They didn't follow.

"Man!" I exclaimed. I stared down at the throbbing heart in my hand, then at the gaping hole in Glottis' chest. I shrugged helplessly to myself and dropped the heart into the hole. The arteries began to twist and slowly reattached themselves. The wound closed over with a sickening slurp, and Glottis jerked himself upright.

"…*eeeEEEAH!! <u>HEART!</u>* " He gasped, as if running short of air. "Heart is good! Be good to heart!" He babbled with wide-eyes. "Don't tear out heart! Heart is good! Strong, beating, *good* heart!"

He surged to his feet, still breathing heavily. Almost instantly, Glottis seemed to forget what had just transpired as his eyes fixed themselves on the *Bone Wagon*.

"Hey, is that my car?" He asked.

"Sure is, buddy." I replied, a little shaken. "Wanna go for a ride?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" He exclaimed. "But where are we going, Manny?"

"To Rubacava." I answered. "We've got to find Meché."

"Miss Colomar?" Glottis asked, ears quivering. "What happened?"

"Everything's gone wrong, *carnal*. I don't have time to explain right now. Just head northwest and we'll find the road to Rubacava."

"But Manny," Glottis protested, "this is a low-riding street rod, not a four-by-four! We should go back a ways, swing 'round the edge of the forest, and get onto the main highway."

"She's got most of a day on us." I said, kicking the ground. "The ground seems pretty level and there's lots of space between the trees. Let's give it a shot and see how we do."

"Okay, Manny." Glottis sighed, clearly still unsure. "Hop in."

I climbed up into my seat and Glottis got behind the wheel. He started out cautiously, but gradually gained confidence. But the path we were following only got rougher as we went on, if still passable. We drove for what seemed like hours, but close to dawn we came to the oddest thing I had ever seen. It was some kind of industrial park, but the trees around it all had bizarre pieces of twisted machinery attached to them. Everything was still, probably because it was Saturday. I yelled at Glottis to stop the car.

"What kind of unholy Christmas tree farm IS this, Glottis?" I asked over the *Bone Wagon*'s powerfully throbbing idle.

"Oh, city boy!" Glottis snorted. "You work all day in a sixty-story skyscraper, but didn't you ever wonder what it was made of? The marrow of these trees, Manny! They suck it right out! It's just like cement!"

"Is that why the town's called 'El Marrow'?" I asked.

"Huh?" Glottis said, his ears twitching. "Never thought of that…"

His face scrunched up while he thought of it. "Maybe so!" He finally exclaimed with a vigorous nod of his head.

I looked around at the various pieces of machinery, and asked Glottis, "How's our fuel situation?"
Glottis checked the gauge. "Not so good, Manny. Hey, I see some trucks over there! We could siphon off some gas!"
"You're right." I said.
Glottis drove over to the trucks and slowly began filling up in the main tank and the auxiliary. I climbed down from the *Bone Wagon* and looked over at some of the trees.
"Those pumps along the trunk draw the marrow into that piping." Glottis explained. "And that spinning thing on top keeps the trunk balanced so the pumps don't shake the tree apart."
"Uh-huh." I said, fascinated. Really.
"*Oh!* " Glottis suddenly exclaimed. "But if we shook a tree down, those pumps would dislodge and I could make high-lift shocks out of them for the *Bone Wagon*!"
I figured Glottis was probably right. The ground was getting rougher, and I figured we'd lose more time turning around (especially after having come this far) than the time it would take for Glottis to modify the car. We found the gear he wanted in some of the trucks, and Glottis had four shocks ready by mid-morning.
"Manny," he said when he had finished, "until now, we scraped across the ground like rats. But from now on, we soar! Like eagles! Yeah, like *eagles… on pogo sticks!!* I'll go get the car." He grinned with extreme triumph as he lumbered off.
I honestly shook my head, wondering what went on in that massive skull of his.

It was early afternoon before Glottis had the shocks properly fitted to the car, tested out, and ready to go.
"What a relief." I said as Glottis demonstrated how the shocks lifted the body of the car three feet up into the air, and then back down again. "I was getting concerned that our transport wasn't ostentatious enough."
"Get in." He said with a crooked grin. "Or are you afraid of heights?"
"Watch how scared I am." I said defiantly as I climbed up to my seat in the wailing, demonic-looking taco-wagon. "Let's see how far we can get before nightfall, *carnal*."
"I think we can make that road you were talking about, anyway." Glottis said as he got into his own seat. He looked up at me with uncertainty. "Which way is northwest again?"
I checked my compass and pointed the way. The engine roared once more into life, and we headed off.

We made far better time with our new clearance, but the ground continued to get rougher. It also tended to slope downwards. The *Bone Wagon* eventually came to a stop and Glottis turned to face me.

"Hey, Manny." He said. "There's a river that runs through this forest. I think we're gonna hit that before we find the road."

"Well, if we do, we can follow it up to the road." I replied.

"The ground's only going to get rougher, Manny."

"Let's just go a little farther and see what we find." I said.

"Okay, Manny…" Glottis sighed.

It was getting towards the evening when Glottis suddenly slammed on the brakes.

"What is it now?" I demanded.

"Manny… I'm scared of that sign!" Glottis said, pointing.

"Oh, for…" I grumbled as I climbed down from the seat and walked over to the sign. I had to admit, it was pretty creepy looking: rusty, with unnecessary jagged pieces sticking out. It read:

They'll tear you apart, bone by bone
And build from you a human throne
Their buck-toothed king will sit upon
What once was you, but now is gone
Beware the creatures that come from hell
Steady, traveller – use this knowledge well

"*¡Hijole!* " I exclaimed. "What does *that* mean?"

"Demon beavers, Manny!" Glottis said with a tremor in his voice. "They'll make you into a dam!"

"Relax, Geppetto." I said dismissively as I climbed back into the car. "I'm not made of wood."

"But, Manny…" Glottis whined in protest. "They don't use wood!"

"That's their problem! Let's go!"

"Manny!" Glottis exclaimed.

"C'mon!" I ordered impatiently. My only concern was to reach Rubacava before Meché.

Glottis merely sighed and rolled forward again. After a few minutes we came to a narrow track. We followed it and crested over a small rise, beyond which and far below was an immense, jet-black river. The light was getting dim, but I thought I saw something good.

"Is that a bridge?" I asked, pointing.

"Uh… not exactly, Manny." Glottis said, the tremor in his voice still present.

"Well, let's get a little closer." I urged as Glottis carefully drove down the slope. We drew closer and I got a better look at my 'bridge'. I felt revolted and sick at the same time.

"Those monsters have built a dam out of *human bones!* " I exclaimed.

"I tried to tell you, Manny." Glottis said in a scolding tone, telling me without actually saying so that a demon knows demons.

"It's pretty wide, though." I went on. "Think we could drive across?"

"Those things are mean!" Glottis protested. "They bite, they claw… and if one of them wrapped around my drive shaft, I'd be picking flaming hunks of fur out of my U-joint for months!"

"Okay." I said. "But the alternative is to turn around, and that would take forever. Just raise us up on those new shocks and go as fast as you can."
Glottis squirmed uncomfortably. "Manny, I don't know if I like the idea of driving over people."

"They won't feel it," I chuckled, "they're dead!"

"*You're* dead." He pointed out. "I wouldn't want to drive over you!"

"That's because you and I are friends."

"Aw, Manny…" Glottis said, a little flattered. "You really want to do this?"

"If that dam can hold up across a big river of tar like that, it can support the *Bone Wagon*." I said, partially to assure myself. "And mean or not, no demon would want to take on a bad-ass hotrod like this!"

"Yeah!" Glottis said, now properly motivated. "Let's go!"
He gunned the engine and drove to the edge of the damn. It was huge.
I shuddered deeply as I saw the vast mass of human remains packed into the unholy structure. Several burning shapes scurried around the dam. Close up, the many skulls embedded into the dam seemed to glare accusingly up at us.

"Run for your lives, you buck-toothed glow-balls!" Glottis roared as he raised the *Bone Wagon* up to its full height. The car surged forward as several beavers leapt out of the way. One, braver – or dumber – than the rest, lunged at the car. Glottis swerved with ease into the beast and it disappeared under the car. There was a hefty lurch as the rear wheel collided with the beast. The demon beaver burst into a bright shower of sparks.

"Plenty more where that came from!" I shouted back toward the smoking remains.
No other beavers challenged us after that.
We got across in two or three minutes, and the *Bone Wagon* slowly climbed the rising ground on the other side. About an hour later we found the road to Rubacava.
Glottis lowered us down once more and floored the accelerator as we blasted off into the inky darkness of the night.

Chapter 10 – Rubacava or Bust

I woke up to someone nudging me, as I was surprised to discover that I had fallen asleep.
I peered over the side of the *Bone Wagon* and saw Glottis standing beside me. It was still dark, but there were some dim lights nearby.
"What is it, *mano*?" I asked.
"It's two in the morning, Manny." Glottis replied. "I'm tired and I'm hungry."
"Where are we?" I yawned as I stretched out of pointless habit.
"Some road-stop." He answered. "A café, motel, gas station and some houses."
I fished in my backpack for my wallet. I found some money in the pack from Sal and Eva, but added to what I already had on me, it didn't amount to very much. Virtually all I had was in my bank account back in El Marrow.
"The café open?" I asked.
"Yeah, it's a twenty-four hour joint. Souls come through all the time."
I climbed down from my seat. "Well, it had better be a cheap joint 'cause I don't have much on me."
"I've got a little money too, Manny." Glottis said as we walked over to the café. "But it's a long way to Rubacava…"
"Once we get there I'll have to get my bank account transferred. It could be a long wait for Meché, and I doubt Sal and Eva are gonna bankroll us. So we might need jobs."
"Who're Sal and Eva?" Glottis asked, cocking his head at the unfamiliar names as I pulled the door open and went inside.

The café was mostly empty, only two or three other souls besides the waitress and short-order cook behind the grill. We took a booth as far away from the others as possible. The waitress – a girl with very asymmetrical features – came over to us. Glottis asked for hashed potatoes and eggs, and a pitcher of orange juice. I just ordered coffee. When the waitress had gone I answered Glottis' question.
"Sal's the leader of something called the Lost Souls Alliance. Something's rotten in the DOD and the LSA is fighting it. Eva's part of it and so am I, now."
Glottis' face scrunched up with the effort of thinking. "Does this have something to do with Miss Colomar?" He asked.
"Yeah…" I sighed. "Meché was supposed to get a Double-N ticket, only somebody messed with her file and stole the ticket. We've got to find her and expose the racket. Then I can get my job back and work off my time."
"We've got to help Miss Colomar too, Manny." Glottis said. "She's in trouble!"
"I know buddy, I know. But she's just one part of this whole mess. If Sal's right, then hundreds of Double-N's have been stolen from good souls over the years."
"Jeez…" Glottis breathed. "That's really bad."

Suddenly, Glottis perked up with wide eyes. "Hey! Is that why we were fired? For getting in the way of the scam? We could be in big trouble, Manny!" He exclaimed.

"Relax, Glottis." I said. "We're getting farther away from El Marrow all the time. No one knows where we are or what we're doing except the LSA."

"Can we trust them?"

"Well," I said, pondering that question myself. "I trust Eva, and Eva trusts Salvador. That's good enough for me."

"Okay, Manny." Glottis said, relaxing. "I'll trust *you*."

The waitress brought Glottis' food and my coffee. After I had got down some of the hot liquid and Glottis was still stuffing his face, I stood up from the seat and walked over to the waitress as she was fiddling with ketchup bottles and salt shakers behind the counter.

"Slow night, huh?" I said to her as I approached.

"About usual." She shrugged.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a dump like this, anyway?"

She gave me an annoyed look which I probably deserved. "Trying to earn some money to get me across the Land of the Dead. The DOD wouldn't do nothin' for me."

The hash-slinger came around to the counter and said to the waitress in a gruff voice, "This guy buggin' you, Lola?"

"Nah, Eddie." She replied. "He's okay."

Eddie simply glowered at me as he went back to the grill. I ignored his gaze and looked back at Lola.

"I'm looking for a woman who's in kind of a similar fix. Her name's Mercedes Colomar." I explained.

Lola shook her head. "Never met anyone by that name." She said.

"She goes by Meché. Might've come through in the last day or so." I went on. Lola remained silent and shook her head again. I sighed. "Well, thanks anyway." I made to return to Glottis.

"Wait," Lola spoke up. "What's your name, mister?"

"Calavera." I answered. "Manny Calavera."

"Okay, Manny." She said. "If I see this Meché woman, I'll tell her you're looking for her. Maybe I can even send word to you."

"I'll be stopping in Rubacava if I don't find her first."

"Then stop first at the Rub-a-Mat when you get there." Lola said. "That's a diner, the first joint you'll come across when you get into Rubacava. I sort of know the owner. If I see your Meché, I'll send word there."

"That'd be great, Lola. Thanks." I said earnestly.

"Sure thing, Manny."

As I walked back to my booth, I heard the cook grumbling to Lola. "Are you nuts? That guy's troubles ain't yours!"

"Oh, shut up, Eddie." Lola huffed back.

"Any luck?" Glottis asked when I sat back down across from him.

"No." I said. "Maybe she's ahead of us."

"She's gotta be behind us. I was doing 80 once we got on that road."

"It took us a while to get through the forest." I reminded him.

"Manny, we averaged about 15 in the forest. Just how fast do you think Miss Colomar can walk, anyway?"

"Just think positively." I said.

"Okay, Manny." Glottis sighed. Then he released a lengthy yawn.

"C'mon, buddy. Let's check out that motel." I suggested.

"Sure." He replied, getting up with me.

We spent the rest of the night in the *Bone Wagon*. All the motels we came across between El Marrow and Rubacava were just mercenary, it seemed – and Glottis needed food more than he needed a soft bed; although his back wasn't convinced of that.

I asked about Meché wherever we stopped. Glottis thought it was crazy, but I knew that sometimes walkers get lucky and hitch a ride with car owners or sympathetic demon bus drivers. More importantly (since Meché's post-mortem luck wasn't looking bankable so far) I made contacts, and maybe one of them might let me know later down the line if they ever came across Meché.

I got an unpleasant surprise at one of the last stops before Rubacava. It was just a run-of-the-mill gas station and lunch counter. The guy who owned it said he hadn't seen anybody named Mercedes Colomar, but he then told me:

"You know, you're not the first guy to ask me about her."

I quickly put my cup of coffee down before I had the chance to drop it.

"You're kidding me, right?" I asked hopefully.

"Nope. It was just the other day. I remember, because I've never heard of anyone being named 'Mercedes' before. Thought that was just cars."

"Depends on where you're from." I said. "So who was asking about her?"

The guy just shrugged. "Never got his name. He was a big guy, though – built like a football player or something."

An icy feeling seeped into my marrow. The guy didn't seem to notice as he went on.

"Supposed he was the boyfriend or something. People hunt for wives and girlfriends and such all the time after they cross over. Never understood that, myself. A while back this little rat of a man was hunting for his wife. I told him to forget the old bird and be glad he got away without having to pay alimony! Didn't listen, of course… the jackass."

Didn't this guy ever shut up? I decided to play it cool.

"Well, what happened to the guy that was looking for Meché?" I asked.

"Oh, he went back down the road. Guess he was giving up. Good for him if he was, though."

I shivered a little. I would have been cooked if I had met up with Domino on my way through. I wondered how he had missed us, though. The *Bone Wagon* wasn't exactly the standard DOD-issue bathtub anymore.

I paid the guy for the coffee, the gas, and the hotdog I took back to Glottis. He was poking around with the *Bone Wagon's* engine. I handed him the hotdog.

"Bad news, *carnal*." I said glumly.

"No Miss Colomar?" He replied without looking up. "Figures."

"Worse. Domino was here."

"Mr. Hurley?" Glottis asked, his eyes suddenly widening. "D'ya think he was looking for Miss Colomar, too?"

"I *know* he was. She's a loose thread."

"Yeah, and *you're* a loose cannon. What do you suppose will happen if you two meet up in Rubacava?"

I shook my head. "Domino turned back."

"He's got the right idea." Glottis said. "Miss Colomar *can't* be ahead of us."

"I think we're on the right track, though." I countered. "If Domino hasn't found Meché on the way here, it's a sign he's getting desperate and doubling back."

"But, Manny–" Glottis began.

"Don't say it." I interrupted. "I *know* how fast we're going. But we stop every night so you can sleep. A soul in its own car won't necessarily stop. Remember that guy we met up with twice? And buses only make very brief stops – at least five have passed us."

"Yeah…" Glottis said. "Miss Colomar could've hitched a ride, I suppose."

"That's right. Anyway, we don't even know what route she's taking. There are a lot of ways to get to Rubacava, so we might be up against a long search – especially if she does end up walking the whole distance. We need a base to operate from, *carnal*. That base is Rubacava. Sal and Eva aren't exactly sitting on their thumbs back in El Marrow, so we'll let Domino run around in between like a headless chicken."

"Okay, Manny. I guess that makes sense." Glottis said at last. "Mostly…" He added under his breath.

Chapter 11 – The Town That Never Dies

We only had one more stop that night before finally reaching Rubacava at the crack of dawn the next day. The *Bone Wagon* roared into the parking lot next to a small building with a two-story tower at one end that was shaped liked a cactus: The Rub-a-Mat, according to what I'd been told along the way.

I jumped when I heard Glottis start to shout.

"Hello!?" He hollered as he heavily revved the *Bone Wagon's* engine. "Miss Colomar! We're here to save you!"

I scurried down from my seat and walked over to Glottis.

"Hey! Lay off the racket, would you??" I shouted over the engine. "The whole town's asleep!"

"But I wanna drag race!" He protested, finally letting the engine simmer down. "Whey they get a load of my car, we're gonna be the talk of the town!"

"You're right; we're going to have to find a good place to hide that road-show!" I said.

Glottis sighed and switched the engine off. Sometimes he just lost perspective when he was behind the wheel.

"Speaking of hiding…" I went on. "I wonder if Meché's here already…" I started walking up to the Rub-a-Mat. "I'm going to see what I can stir up." I called back to Glottis. Then to myself, "Not a bad piece of real estate, actually. It's got potential."

The entrance to the Rub-a-Mat was located under the cactus-looking portion of the building. Inside, I finally understood the 'mat' part.

"It's an automat!" I said quietly to myself. "Man, I haven't been in one of these places since I was a kid!"

The place seemed completely deserted, except for a small guy mopping the floor at the other end of the building. The dining area was brightly lit and colourful in a sterilized kind of way. Currently-empty food slots lined the walls, each labelled with a numbered plastic card. I scanned them as I walked past. There was everything from simple sandwiches and salads to full dinners, just like the old-time automats I remembered.

The guy with the mop turned partly towards me as I approached – he looked strangely familiar. I walked closer to get a better look. 'It's a small world, after all' I thought.

"Mr. Flores…" I said in a low voice. Celso jumped. "I'm ready to take you now."

"Manny Calavera?" He asked, sounding as surprised as he looked. "Is that really you?" Celso looked me up and down. "Didn't you used to be taller?"

There was really no point in explaining, so I just went on with what had become my opening line as of late.

"I'm looking for a woman named Mercedes Colomar."

"Well, no one's come through town by that name." Celso said, returning to his mopping. "And you can take it from me, because I, too, am looking for someone; so I watch the comings and goings around here *very* carefully."

"Who are you looking for?" I asked.

"Well…" Celso sighed, stopping to lean on his mop. "If you must know, it's my wife. She passed away not long before I, and I've heard that she, too, is crossing the Land of the Dead on foot. It is said that all lost souls come to Rubacava, so I came here to wait for her."

"Don't you think she might have gone on ahead of you?"

"Oh, Manny! If she had arrived here first, surely she would have waited for me."

I thought that was extremely unlikely, but I kept that to myself.

"I don't suppose anyone named Lola has called with a message for me?" I asked.

Celso shook his head. "Not that I know of, but maybe you should ask the boss when he gets in. The only phone we've got is in his office upstairs."

"Okay. Know a good place to stay in town?"

"What's your price range?" Celso said, resuming his mopping.

"Something around the high end of nothing."

"Then maybe it's time you started thinking about getting a job."

"Can you get me a job *here*?"

"What are your skills?" Celso asked.

I merely shrugged. "Sales."

"Well, we do need someone else to close up; but you'll have to talk to the boss about that, too. He'll be in after noon."

"Why so late?" I asked.

"Because we don't have anyone else." Celso said shortly. "I'm sorry Manuel, but I've got to get this place ready to open."

"Right." I nodded. "But I'll be back to talk to your boss. And maybe I can help you find your wife."

"She'll be the one asking for her beloved Celso." He said happily.

"Sure." I said on my way outside.

When I got back outside, I saw someone standing by the *Bone Wagon* talking to Glottis. The guy wore a blue seaman's jacket and looked kind of official. And, for some reason, he was wearing an eye-patch.

"Well, actually," I heard Glottis saying, "it's mostly stock parts with a few mods here-and-there."

"So would that be glass packs I'm hearing, or turbo?" The stranger asked in a noticeably raspy voice.

"*Hola*." I said as I approached.

"Hey, Manny!" Glottis exclaimed. "Dockmaster Velasco here says he's got a place we can dry dock the *Bone Wagon* for a while."

"Oh, yeah." Velasco said. "We can't leave a beauty like this out in the fog or her chrome will get pitted."

"Pitted?" Glottis asked with a quaver in his voice, as if it were the worst thing imaginable. "Did you hear that, Manny? Pitted!"

"You folks planning to stay in Rubacava for a spell?" Velasco asked.

"We might be here a while, yeah." I answered. "We're looking for a woman named Mercedes Colomar."

"Hmm…" Velasco considered for a moment. "Well, I'm not too good with names." He eventually said. "Did she have any distinguishing marks? A tattoo?"

"Not that she showed me. How about work? Is there any work in town?" I asked, switching tracks. I wasn't entirely sure if I wanted to work with Celso.

"Well, there's plenty of work down at the docks, but it's all union work. And I just don't see *you* in that union." Velasco chuckled deeply at whatever he thought was funny about me being in the union.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Maybe. I wouldn't know, son. It's a big town, and I don't memorize the want ads. You'll just have to hunt around like everyone else."

"Sorry." I said, feeling a little avaricious. "We're getting kind of low on cash and—"

Velasco simply waved my apology away. "Oh, don't apologize. I know how folks are when they come into town. Hell, I was the same way m'self."

"Actually, I think I have a prospect already."

"Then take it." Velasco said. "Don't be too proud to accept what's offered."

"Manny," Glottis suddenly piped up, "Could I have an eye-patch?"
Velasco laughed.

"Can I just ask…" I said, not wanting to be disrespectful. "What *is* under the eye-patch? 'Cause I *know* it's not an eye."

"Oh, well." Velasco said, still chuckling to himself. "When I was alive, I had an eye-patch like this. This one's just for the phantom pain. Plus, that one eye socket used to scream like a banshee when the trade winds blew, so I plugger 'er. Don't affect my sight none." Velasco nodded his head slightly, and then looked over at the Rub-a-Mat. "Looks like that idiot Celso's finally openin' up." He went on, walking slowly to the door.

"Hey, I'm hungry too." Glottis said, getting out of the car.

"Am I supposed to guard the *Bone Wagon*?" I protested.

"Oh, just put 'er where I told you, Glottis." Velasco called out over his shoulder. "You shouldn't have any trouble finding it."

"Okay, Mr. Velasco." Glottis said as he got back into the car and tore off down the road.

"There's a big shed at the end of the docks." Velasco explained to me. "The doors are far too heavy for me to open. Haven't been able to get in since Aitor the port demon went to work for that damn cat racetrack. You comin' in for breakfast?"

"We're pretty strapped." I said. "And Glottis needs to eat more than I do. I'm just gonna look around town."

"Suit yourself." Velasco spoke in a slightly lower tone. "And watch your step. Rubacava ain't the quaint little port town she used to be."
He gave a lazy kind of wave and disappeared inside the Rub-a-Mat.

Rubacava was situated along a cliff over the Sea of Lament. The Rub-a-Mat and a few other buildings were positioned alongside the road at the top with an airport further inland. The rest of the town was along the base of the cliff and on a cluster of rocky islands offshore. Apart from the docks there wasn't much activity at this early hour. Unlike El Marrow, Rubacava was supposed to have quite a nightlife. Most of the town wouldn't really get moving until the morning was long passed.

I went looking for a post office and found it fairly quickly, but it was still closed. There was a telegraph office nearby, which was open – so I went in there to send my first 'report' to Salvador.

SALVADOR
ARRIVED SAFELY IN RUBACAVA STOP NO SIGN OF MUTUAL FRIEND STOP HAVE LEARNED DH WAS ON TRAIL BUT WENT BACK STOP HOPE CHILDREN ARE WELL
MANUEL

I figured that was discreet enough.

I asked for a phone book to see what banks there were in town. To my luck, it turned out that the bank I used in El Marrow had a branch in Rubacava. That would make getting my money much simpler. I went down to the branch to see when it would open, and spent the remainder of my day checking out the rest of the town until after noon.
I looked in on Glottis, who was tinkering with the *Bone Wagon* in Velasco's shed. Then I went to the bank to arrange the transfer of my account. After that, it was finally time to see about that job.

The Rub-a-Mat was much busier than when I was last in there. I came in at the tail end of the lunch rush. Celso was pretty busy, but he sent me to the office which was up in the cactus tower. There was definitely no message from Lola but the job was mine for the asking. The boss was kind of desperate – apparently not having someone to close up was interfering with his social life and just knowing Celso put me over the top. So I got the job without a hitch, which basically just involved me taking over Celso's mop and shutting the place up at 10 PM.
There was still a couple of hours before I had to start working, so I found a cheap residential hotel and checked myself in. I told Glottis where I was staying, let my new bank know, and arranged with the telegraph office to have any reply I received to be redirected to the Rub-a-Mat. With all that settled I began my new job.
Celso showed me the ropes, which boiled down to keeping the place clean, making sure the food slots were all full and fresh, and getting on the cook's ass if they weren't. Not exactly demanding work; and very dull compared to reaping. At least there were people, but Celso pretty much ignored them since he didn't actually have to wait on them. You wouldn't think a guy without bowels could be so constipated, but there you have it. I decided I was going to be more personable.
The first guy I spoke to was drenched in local colour – very literally. He looked like he had fallen asleep in an alley and a drunken street artist doodled all over him. I greeted him but he just muttered something in an unintelligible language and got a tongue sandwich from slot 22.
"Sweet guy." I said under my breath to Celso.
Celso only shrugged.
"Who is he?" I persisted.
"Toto Santos." Celso replied. "Scrimshaw artist. He has a filthy little parlour down by the docks. As you can see, he practices on himself."
I wasn't quite sure I'd heard that right. "You mean he *carves* those designs on *himself?*"
"And on anyone else who will pay him."
"But who in their right mind…?" I began to ask, but then answered my own question. "Oh. Sailors."
"Who are usually stinking drunk when they call on Mr. Santos." Celso said.
I shook my head. "Is he a regular?"
"Yes. A lot of wharf rats here. All our customers are labourers and transient souls."

"Transient souls are the staff, too." I remarked. "What happened to your walking stick, anyway?"

"I broke it over the head of some hideous monster in the forest."

"Did it look like a little fireball with big teeth?" I asked.

"Yes, but it wasn't little." Celso shivered. "And it definitely was *not* in your brochures."

"Hey, don't blame me. I didn't write them." I confessed.

Celso turned his head to the clock. "Well, that's the end of my day. I'll see you tomorrow, Manuel." He said, and then left.

Santos loudly blurted out something in what seemed like a different language than before. It sounded vile.

"I don't know what you said, brother," I remarked, "but I agree with it."

Santos huffed angrily. "Where's Jesus?"

He was referring to Jesus Lopez, the owner of the Rub-a-Mat.

"Seated at the right hand of the Father, I guess." I replied with a grin.

That startled Santos enough that he actually looked right at me. I gave a brief chuckle and continued with, "Seriously, he took the rest of the day off now that I'm here to close up."

Santos muttered something under his breath and turned back to his sandwich with an audible grumble.

Just then, a young boy from the telegraph office came in with a reply to my message to Salvador.

AGENT CALAVERA
HAVE RECEIVED WORD OF YOUR SAFE ARRIVAL IN RUBACAVA STOP THIS IS EXCELLENT NEWS AS YOUR SERVICE TO THE LSA MAY NOW CONTINUE STOP I AM PLEASED TO REPORT THE SUCCESSFUL HATCHING OF THE EGGS YOU LIBERATED STOP THE HATCHLINGS WHICH EVA HAS NAMED MANNY AND MECHÉ ARE QUITE HEALTHY AND EAGER TO SERVE OUR CAUSE STOP I WILL COMMUNICATE NEWS CONCERNING DOMINO HURLEY STOP FOR THE REVOLUTION
SALVADOR LIMONES

What the hell had happened to 'discreet'? I shook my head and stuffed the telegram into my pocket.

That night, just as I was getting ready to close up, a very nice-looking young lady ran into the Rub-a-Mat.

"Won't be a sec." She said as she got a couple of sandwiches. "Hey!" She suddenly exclaimed in surprise when she saw that I wasn't the owner. "You're new!"

"Brand spanking." I smiled.

"That's a rare thing around here." She cooed.

"Nice uniform." I returned.

"All in the line of duty."

"Yeah? Even the heels?"

"No, those were my idea."

"You know," I said with another chuckle, "I think you'll do."

"You bet I do." She said archly. "Mop boy."

I let out a definite laugh. There was a certain line of chemistry developing here. "I'm Calavera. Manny Calavera."

"Carla Ashburn." She said, before rushing out again. "Come and see me sometime!"

I was about to resume my mopping, when she suddenly poked her head back in the door. "515 security gate. Feline Meadows." She disappeared again.

I finished closing up the Rub-a-Mat and checked in again on Glottis. He was doing just fine, and had been helping Velasco out around the docks. He thought he might keep doing that for awhile until anything more lucrative came up. After I was done looking in on him, I wandered the streets and bridges of Rubacava for a time, just taking things in. The place had entirely changed from the morning – what had been a quiet, drab little port town during the daytime was now bright, colourful and full of people… in parts. It was kind of a cross between Vegas and Venice leavened by North River waterfront.

A lot of activity was centred on one of the larger islands, which was taken up by a huge, coliseum-like structure. Banks of floodlights ringed the open top, and the roar of the crow inside could be heard from far off. Souls streamed to and from the island. Those going to the island were excited, and those coming away were mostly looking pretty dejected. If I had any doubts before that this was Feline Meadows, the monumental race cat statues carved in relief around the top of the building erased them. Most of the Vegas vibes were coming off that joint.

I let myself get pulled along with the ingoing crowd into the base of the track; that was where the crowd divided. Many people went straight to find seats, while many others went to place bets. A much, much smaller group split off to trickle down an out-of-the-way corridor. I followed those guys far enough to take a look. It was just a short passage leading to an elevator, but it was quite a spread nevertheless – glittery cat images paced the walls while white paw-prints ran all over the deep-purple carpet. One of the people I was following flashed something at the bruiser guarding the elevator. I quickly turned away before the guy could do more than glare in my direction.

I checked out some of the other nooks and crannies of the place, and finally ran across some posters of airships. Beyond those I found signs leading me to the numbered terminals. And there, at the 515 security gate, was Carla and her nail-me heels. She was getting quite a few travellers through. I waited patiently until they were gone and she had sat back down at her desk before approaching.

"Well, well." She said when she saw me. "If it isn't Manny Calavera! What brings you here?"

"You do, actually. I just couldn't resist your invitation." I said coolly, sitting on the edge of her desk.

"Well, you know what they say…" She said, leaning closer and presenting a full view of her sternum. "Resistance is futile."

"Yeah? Who says that?"

Carla just shook her head slightly. "So, you new in town?" She asked.

"Got in this morning." I answered. "Been working in El Marrow the last few years."

"Doing what?"

"I was with the DOD as a reaper."

Carla sat back in her chair, withdrawing the sublime invitation. "A reaper, huh? I can't say I like you guys much."

Her tone could have given my ear holes frostbite. I was taken back a little. I never got that reaction in El Marrow. "Why not?" I asked curiously.

"Because you guys decide who goes on and who gets stuck here, that's why. Who the hell made *you* judge and jury?"

"It's not like that." I protested calmly with a shake of my head. "Do you know how a soul gets to be a reaper in the first place? You have to foul your life up so badly that you're not even allowed to hoof it if you wanted to. Reapers and everyone else at the DOD are working there to pay off a debt."

"And that justifies making me work my way across the Land of the Dead, and maybe never making it?" She demanded.

"Of course not. That's not what I mean. Look, I handled thousands of cases, and I did everything I could to give my clients the best travel packages they deserved."

"But what gives you the right to say who deserves what?"

"I didn't have that right." I insisted. "No reaper does. The DOD gives us the rules to go by and we just follow them."

"Just following orders, huh?" The sarcasm cut me deep, but didn't hit anything vital.

"I'm sorry if you feel you weren't given a fair shake." I said, starting to feel angry but trying to tamp it down. "I was pretty burned up about it too, when I was told *my* fate."

"It's not fair." Carla protested. "I didn't kill anyone, you know."

"Neither did I, but that's not the point." I shrugged. "It's not about what's fair, it's about justice. It's cold and it's hard, but it *is* right. I don't know… maybe you have to carry a scythe to understand that." I sighed as I stood up from the edge of the desk. "I guess there's nothing I can say that will make you change your attitude."

I left the security gate and went back to my hotel.

Chapter 12 – Manny Finds His Groove

The next day I purchased a road map of the Land of the Dead for the El Marrow-to-Rubacava region. Just because I came to Rubacava by a particular route didn't mean that Meché would follow the same.
I worked out with Glottis a kind of system for searching for Meché, checking every stop on the way to Rubacava.
But all that would have to wait for my days off.

When I went into the Rub-a-Mat that second day, Celso came up to me.
"Were you serious about helping me find my wife?"
"Sure." I said. Frankly, I didn't really care one way or the other if Celso found his wife, but you reap what you sew.
Celso handed me a photograph. "Here. I got this from the DOD and made copies to hand out. Isn't she something?"
"She must have been beautiful with skin." I said, but in actuality I don't think skin would have helped.
"Weren't we all?" Celso sighed in a melancholy tone.

That day progressed pretty much like the first one. I tried to draw out Toto Santos when he came in, but still no soap. I did better with a few other customers, but they all seemed a little unsure of this new hand interacting with them. That night, as I was doing the closing-up routine, Carla came in for her sandwiches. This time she walked in slowly instead of running.
"Hi." She said quietly.
"Hey!" I answered enthusiastically, although inwardly I was still a little wary. "It's great to see you again, Carla."
"Really?" She asked, sounding a surprised and a little hopeful. "I thought you might be steamed at me, the way you walked out…"
"Forget about it." I said with a smile. "I felt a fight coming on, so I decided to get away while we were still being polite to each other."
"You sure? No other reason?"
"Nope." I assured her. "I want to be your friend, and an argument isn't the best way to start."
"Yeah." She said, looking down at the floor. "I'm sorry, I'm just…" She shrugged slightly. "Well, the night shift gives you a lot of time to think. I'm still not sure about reapers, but I like you."
Carla got her two sandwiches, and then turned back to me. "If you're really not steamed with me, why don't you meet me at the Blue Casket the day after tomorrow when you close up?"
"I'd like that. See you then." I said.
She waved, did a little pirouette and skipped out.

The next day at work, Toto Santos actually nodded to me when I greeted him. That was definitely progress.
Jesus Lopez was coming down from his office while I was making my efforts with Santos. He nodded to me himself as he walked by, and murmured to me. "Keep it up, Calavera – you might just get a civil word out of him someday."

"That's something to look forward to." I chuckled.
Lopez laughed as well, and then turned to Celso. "You can knock off. The lunch crowd has tapered off early today."
Celso left without saying a word.

"Such a sourpuss." Lopez sighed. I sensed a grimace from him. "Forget I said that, anyway."

"Well, Celso's got a lot on his mind." I said.

"Don't we all?" Lopez replied without looking back. "I was talking with Etienne last night." He went on, clearly changing the subject. "You know, he's the guy who's always humming show tunes out-of-key?" I nodded. "Anyway, he was saying to me that he likes coming into the place more since you got here. He's not alone, either – the customers seem to like the way you greet them."

"Well, I got to be kind of a people person at the DOD. Once you get a client in your office, it's a good idea to be as friendly as possible with them… especially if you have bad news."
Lopez gave a wry chuckle. "Like telling them they have to be a reaper?"

"Yeah, but I should tell you… it's considered bad taste at the DOD to talk about things like *that*."

"Really?" Lopez said. "Well, I guess I can see why." He shrugged. "But what I really wanted to tell you was that customers appreciate what you're doing. Keep it up, Manny."
He gave me a slap on the shoulder before returning to his office.

"That funny thing is," I was telling Glottis that night, "I'm actually missing the DOD."

"I don't." Glottis replied. "I didn't like being stuck in that garage all those years."

"Well, who would?" I said. "Point is, though, they seem to go by a different set of rules outside of El Marrow. I mean, Carla doesn't like reapers – she was pretty upfront about that – and I'm pretty sure that diner waitress, Lola, had something against the DOD too."

"Can you blame 'em?" Glottis asked, his ears twitching sharply. "I mean, look at it from their point of view: you show them all these fancy brochures about trains and cars, and *then* you tell 'em they have to walk."

"I never jerked anyone around, Glottis." I protested.

"And I'm not saying you did. It's just you can't expect people to know the inside story the way you do, Manny."

"Maybe you're right." I said. I didn't like to admit it, but Glottis had a very good point. "And I bet it's that kind of resentment Copal and Hurley are making a profit on."

"Sure." Glottis huffed. "Justice is for the other guy."

"Everyone wants to be an exception." I grumbled.

I let out a lengthy sigh. All this talk reminded me how much of a stink we were in. I decided to lighten the mood by changing the subject.

"So what are you doing with your time, *mano*?"

"Drivin'!"

"Really? Where?"

"*Every*where! And when I stop, I ask about Miss Colomar."

"Hey! We were supposed to do that together!"

"And we will, Manny. A lot. But I might as well ask while I'm out. And besides, you only talk to people. I've been talking to demons, too. Bus drivers and whatnot."

"Yeah?" I was very impressed. He'd thought of an angle I hadn't. "That's good thinking, Glottis."

"I know!" He puffed up triumphantly. "If Miss Colomar hitches a ride, the drivers will stop at the Rub-a-Mat."

"Assuming she hitches a ride on a bus and the driver is one you talked to. But that really improves our odds."

"Yeah. And I've even been looking through Mr. Velasco's port log. I haven't seen Miss Colomar's name, but I did see a Flores."

"Are you kidding me?!" I exclaimed. "Man or woman?"

"Woman. Maybe it's Mr. Flores' wife."

"Where's Velasco?" I asked.

"Probably napping in his office." Glottis answered with a short, bark-like laugh.

"Well, I'd better talk to him. I'll see you later, buddy."

"Check." He said.

Glottis was actually right about Velasco. I was finally able to wake him.

"Well, hell, Manuel! What're you doin' here?"

"I gotta ask you a question." I said. I showed him the snapshot of Celso's wife. "Ever seen this woman?"

Velasco took the picture and studied it briefly. "Oh, if this is the woman you're lookin' for, take my advice and forget about 'er." He sounded amused. "She sailed out of here a few weeks ago in a cosy port-side cabin built for two… and she *wasn't* alone."

"Actually, that's Celso's wife."

"Ah, now that makes sense. Didn't think she looked like your type." He said. I didn't even know I had one.

"You've got all the details in your log?" I asked. "Can I show it to Celso?"

"If you bring him down here, you can. That log ain't leavin' this here desk." Velasco thumped the worm-eaten, salt-limned mass of petrified wood with his fist for emphasis.

"Fair enough." I said. "How come you haven't told Celso yourself?"

"I told you before, Manny – I ain't good with names. I just write 'em down in my log and forget 'em. Ain't no business of mine what people do with themselves."

"Makes sense." I nodded, sensing another rebuke about my having been a reaper. "I'll bring Celso down here sometime, if that's okay with you."

"Aye. You do that, son." He replied tiredly, and waved me off.

I left the docks and went back to my hotel. I collected my mail from the front desk and, quickly before fanning through it, noticed a letter from Salvador. I rushed up to my room and locked the door tightly before opening the envelope.

Manuel,

We have intriguing news for you. It appears that Domino Hurley has been made office manager in Don Copal's place. What has become of Copal is unknown. As far as we can determine, he has not been seen since his meeting with Hurley and the fat man. Our attempts to trace his whereabouts have so far been unsuccessful. However, things go better on other fronts.

We continue to be able to access the DOD computer network, and have taken further steps to ensure that we may continue to do so. Curiously, it seems that the IT department of the DOD has not detected our activities. The fact that there are so few computers in the Land of the Dead in private hands may explain this lax security. Although we have not made much progress in unravelling the secrets of our enemies, we have identified a number of disaffected agents and other employees of the DOD who may be eager to join our ranks.

So far, we have heard no word of Mercedes Colomar here in El Marrow. We are certain that Domino Hurley continues to search for her, and may be employing his agents in the search. You must be careful Manuel, and pray you do not come to Hurley's attention.

It is desirable that the LSA expand to Rubacava. Be in no hurry, but keep watch for suitable recruits. A mere handful – three or four – would be enough to strengthen your position immeasurably. Please report any news you may have as soon as possible.

For the revolution,
Salvador Limones

Another slip of paper contained a note from Eva.

Manny,

I hope you're keeping well. Sal and I have been working hard at the computer trying to find some trace of these creeps. Sal doesn't say so, but I know he's frustrated. I think he was hoping to find something quickly, but it's going to take a while. They haven't gotten away with it this long by being sloppy.

The pigeons are doing just fine. I hope you're OK with them being called Manny and Meché. I think it's symbolic of the whole struggle. Did you ever think I'd write a sentence like that?

Anyway, we've lined up a trainer for them and soon we'll have our airmail service. Maybe our next message will come on these 'gossamer wings of truth' as Sal calls them. He's such a scream.

Well sweetheart, you just find that Meché woman and we'll expose these SOBs. And if you see Domino, kick him in the tuchis for me.

Love,
Eva

You wouldn't think two people that different would be mixed up together, but there you are. Salvador's news about Domino rattled me, and I wasn't so sure anymore it would be such a good idea to go out looking for Meché myself with him still on the prowl. I couldn't afford to have him find her first, so Glottis' going out on his own was starting to look like far more attractive of an idea. It was *my* job to find Meché, but on the other hand, Glottis could cover more ground without me since he didn't have a regular job to hold down. Maybe I should just fork over some money and have Glottis go all the way to El Marrow and back. I could keep tabs on people already contacted by phone. I'd have to discuss that with Glottis in the morning. Meanwhile, I decided it was best that I get some sleep and gather my thoughts.
Replying to Sal and Eva could wait until I had something important to write.

"Oh, yeah!" Glottis crowed out the next morning when I told him what I had in mind. "I'm gonna tear up those roads!"

"That's great *carnal*, but don't forget to ask about Meché while you're at it. And watch out for Domino!"

"Don't worry, Manny." Glottis said calmly. "I'll only talk to demons and the people who live at the road stops."

"And get me the phone numbers of these places, too. I want to keep tabs on them from here."

"Check. When do you want me to go?"

"Tomorrow, just like we originally planned. I'll get some money for you before you leave. Go back the way we came, touch base with all the people we talked to on the way here, but come back by a different route. I want you to make some new contacts."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of right now, except maybe stay out of El Marrow if you can help it. The *Bone Wagon*'s one car Domino will know on sight."

"Yeah, good point."

"Okay, I'm going to go get you some money now, and then I've got to get to work, *carnal*."

When I got into the Rub-a-Mat, I pulled Celso aside and told him, "Tomorrow I'd like you to go to down to the docks with me."

"I'm not into that kind of thing, Manuel." He said guardedly.

"Swell, but I want you to look at something in Velasco's port log." I replied in a completely unconcerned tone. "It's about your wife."

"My wife? What are you saying…?"

"I'm saying she sailed away before you got here, Celso. I don't expect you to believe me, so we'll go and see Velasco tomorrow."

"Why shouldn't I see him this afternoon?" He demanded to know.

"Because Velasco doesn't like you, that's why." That wasn't something I wanted to say, but the blunter I was, the more likely Celso wasn't going to visit Velasco on his own and maybe not be shown the log book. I still couldn't see any reason to be concerned about the Flores couple, but I also couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to play in their court.

"He doesn't?" Celso replied, sounding genuinely surprised. "Why not?"
I shook my head. "I never probe down onto a client, Celso. And it's not my place to talk about Velasco's feelings." I said. I didn't exactly like Celso, but I also didn't dislike him the way Velasco apparently did. "I can only tell you that you'll never get very far without me to smooth the way."

"All right, Manuel. Velasco never has been very pleasant. I'd be grateful for your help."

"Great. Then it's a date."

"If you must call it that." Celso said with a sniff.
Some people are just born difficult, I guess.

When Brock – the cook – came in to restock the food slots after the lunch crowd had finally cleared out, I told him to empty #22. He looked at me like I had sprouted hair.

"Are you trying to get me *fired*?" He growled.

"Of course not." I said. "I'm just trying to get Toto Santos to speak to me."

"Cursing at you is more likely." Brock said. "And he does THAT already."

"Maybe, but I want to try this anyway." I shrugged.
Brock shook his head, but took the sandwiches out of #22.

"Keep 'em fresh." I said as he did this. "I'll be calling for them in a hurry after Toto gets here."

"Yeah, and then maybe I can restock them before he kills you." Brock said with a fair-sounding snort. I went to object, but he cut me off. "He'd find a way, Cal."
I impatiently waved Brock away, as Celso merely stared.

"Sometimes I think you're crazy, Manny." He piped up. "Why do you want that Santos character to talk to you, anyway?"
I shrugged again. "Mainly because he won't."

"Why make him talk if he doesn't want to?"

"Don't be sure he doesn't. Sometimes it's the guys who don't say much who *really* want people to talk to them."

"And sometimes they just want people to keep their distance." Celso muttered with plain good sense on his side.

"And I intend to find out which kind of person he is."

"Suit yourself, Manuel." Celso said with an unconcerned shrug.
When Toto came in some time later, he dropped his coins in the slot, opened #22's door, grabbed a handful of air and exclaimed: "Hey! What the…?"

"Is there something wrong?" I asked, trying to sound innocent.

"Yeah." Toto growled. "Where the hell's my *lengua*?"

"What?" I said, looking into #22 as if I didn't know what I'd find. "Oh, for the love of…!" I huffed as I walked over to the kitchen doors, which I kicked open and shouted to Brock. "Hey, Brock! Number 22's empty!" I turned and walked back to Toto, seeming apologetic. "I'm sorry. I guess I was sleeping on the job."
Brock came back with the stack of tongue sandwiches from #22. I took one from the top and handed it to Toto.

"Here you are. I apologize for the inconvenience." I said as Brock restocked the food slot and shook his head, disappearing back into the kitchen.

"It's just a sandwich." Toto mumbled, sounding a little bewildered. He looked at me, then at the kitchen door, over to Celso, and then back to me. He shrugged to himself and left the Rub-a-Mat instead of sitting in his usual spot.

"Well done." Celso said sarcastically.

"Hey, he'll be back. I guarantee it. This was just the ice-breaker."

"If you say so, Manny." Celso replied sceptically. "Well, I'll be going. I like to sleep late on my day off. How about I come to your hotel around 10 o'clock and we'll go to see Velasco's log?"

"Fine with me." I said. "But meet me at Velasco's office instead. I'll be on the docks tomorrow morning. I've got some business with Glottis."

"All right. See you in the morning." Celso said. He waved vaguely, and left.

When I closed that night I went down to the Blue Casket. It was a building at the base of the cliff almost directly below the Rub-a-Mat. It was supposed to be a pretty hip place – or maybe it was hep – in a beatnik sort of way. I wouldn't have thought it was Carla's sort of dive, frankly. She was waiting for me outside the Rub-a-Mat when I closed up.

"Woah!" I exclaimed in surprise when I reached the parking lot and she suddenly appeared under a lamp post. "I thought we were going to meet down at the Blue Casket."

"Well…" She said, seeming embarrassed. "I didn't want to go in there by myself. It's kinda got this reputation…" She took my arm as we started walking together.

"Yeah? So why do you want to go there, then?"
She gave a quick shrug. "I feel like slumming. How 'bout you?"

"I slummed my whole life away. One more night won't make much of a difference. I've been kind of curious about the joint, anyway."

We rode the elevator down the cliff, walked to the Blue Casket building, and went down the steps to the entrance. It was shaped liked a coffin.

"Extra-thick doors to seal in the hipness." Carla quipped as I struggled to get them open. The hinges weren't set very well, I swear.
"After you." I said when I finally got them open.
I saw Carla take a deep breath before entering.

It was dark inside – and very, VERY blue. It was almost like being deep underwater. Very disorientating.
The music was loud and so was the crowd. Thick smoke, tobacco and otherwise, hung everywhere. There were black turtlenecks as far as the eye could see.
"Hey, look!" I said into Carla's ear hole. "Dead Beats!"
She laughed, and I started looking for an empty table.

A very petite-looking woman approached us, seemingly out of nowhere.
"New souls!" She cooed in a satiny, sexy voice. The woman took a drag on a cigarette in a fancy-looking holder in a way that would have gotten her arrested in Franco's Spain. "What can I get you hep cats?" She asked on the exhale in a somewhat sarcastic tone.
"A table and a waiter, if you got 'em." I said.
"I've got everything you need, daddy-o." She replied in a low, throaty purr.
"Oh…" I practically moaned. I could see Carla giving me a strange look.
"This way." The woman said. She led the way, her pelvis twitching in an inviting manner.
"Kind of dark in here." Carla said aloud.
"Dark and cold – like the hearts of men." The woman shot back.
"Uh…" I said, a little unsure of where that came from.
"Here you are." The woman said when we came to an empty table. "You sit down and I'll get you that waiter."
She turned and walked away. I'm not sorry to say that I enjoyed the view.
Carla reached over and punched me in the arm.
"Are you out of your mind?!" She demanded. "That's Olivia Ofrenda! Maximino's girl!"
"Yeah? The cat track guy?" I asked.
"Yeah! *And* the owner of the terminal gates. So watch yourself."
"Tough customer, eh?"
"Just an old-time racketeer, Manny. They say he was in Capone's gang."
"I heard it was Bandello's."
"Whatever." Carla said dismissively, missing the joke. "The point is, noticing Olivia too much is bad for your health."
Maybe she had a point.
I looked around. The joint was definitely packed, and not just with the expected 'beatnik crowd'. They made up a clear majority, sure – but there were labouring types mixed in along with a few squares with the word 'tourist' practically stamped on their foreheads. Ofrenda's dive really pulled them in, by the looks of things. I scanned the faces, more idly wondering if this was the sort of place Meché would be drawn to.

"Looking for someone?" Carla asked.
I jumped slightly. I had almost forgotten she was there… not a good way to begin the evening. Carla, I thought, was good stuff; she deserved my full attention.
"Sorry…" I said sincerely. "I was wondering if someone I know might be here." I stopped for a moment, trying to think of the least offensive way to broach the subject. "I don't suppose you'd remember if anyone named Mercedes Colomar came through your security gate any time recently?"
I figured that probably didn't sound the way I wanted it to.
Carla gave me a hard-to-read look. It could have been offended, it could have just been arch.
"I must be doing well if you're thinking about old girlfriends." She said.
Arch, I decided.
To lighten the mood, I gave a brief laugh. "She's an old client." At this, Carla visibly relaxed. "I was curious whether she'd made it this far. She thought she had to walk, but it was a mistake. The paperwork was screwed up and she cleared out before it was caught." I said.
Carla frowned, but not really at me. "I didn't know the DOD made mistakes…"
"Usually they don't." I went on. "It's really no concern of mine," I lied, "but you have to wonder how she's getting on."
"If you meet her again, maybe things could be straightened out." Carla said to me. "You still got any pull with the DOD?"
That was an awkward question. Before I could think of a safe, meaningless answer, the music stopped. Suddenly, we could hear the guys at the next table.
"But don't ya see?" One of them was saying loudly. "When the government fades away, so will our troubles!"
"Ah, nonsense." Another replied. "We'll always need some armed force to fight off the return of capitalism."
Carla shot me a questioning look. I was too busy trying not to laugh, partly in relief.
"That sort of fascist thinking is as dead as *you* are, comrade." The third snapped. "When we get rid of—"
At that moment, the music started up again and the doctrinal argument at the next table vanished beneath it.
"Are those guys for real?" Carla asked me.
"Yes, they are." I said. "And so was I."
A waiter approached us, and we ordered some drinks. I lit a couple of cigarettes and passed one to Carla.
"What do you mean, 'so was I'?" Carla asked.
I just shrugged. "There are a lot of ways for dealing with the world when you're alienated. Sitting around a table, getting drunk and plotting revolution is one of them. Not that you look at it that way when you're sitting at the table, of course."
"I don't quite get you." Carla said.
"I'm just getting cynical in my semi-old age, that's all."

She shook her head slowly at me. "C'mon, Manny. Do people really take all that 'dictatorship of the proletariat' stuff seriously?"

"Sure. Haven't you ever been really committed to anything?" I said.

"I was an army brat." She replied. "The only thing I cared about was keeping my distance from people so I wouldn't get hurt when we moved on."

"Oh. Then I can see why you don't get it. Isn't 'Marx' just an expletive in the military?"

"Something like that. That's kind of the way my daddy looked at it."

"Yeah, well it's something else to other people. Underneath all the ideological posturing, Marxism is just about social justice. Not that it ever works out that way." I gave another brief shrug. I never imagined I'd be having this sort of conversation with somebody like Carla. "If the posturing doesn't foul things up, human nature will. But that never stopped anyone from believing. Sometimes you just have to, no matter what."

"Well, I still don't understand." Carla said defiantly. "The way I figure it, the only thing you can do is to look out for yourself."

That attitude was probably the root of why Carla had to walk across the Land of the Dead… but I kept that to myself.

The music died away again, and this time our neighbours were all silent. They were looking towards the little stage that was against one wall of the club. Olivia was standing under a dim spotlight. A guy with bongos sat to one side of her, and Olivia began reciting a poem in a low, sultry voice:

"With bony hands, I hold my partner.
On soulless feet, we cross the floor.
The music stops, as if to answer,
an empty knocking at the door.
It seems his skin was sweet as mango,
when last I held him to my breast.
But now, we dance this Grim Fandango,
and will four years, before we rest."

The beatnik audience began clicking their fingers rapidly in approval. Scattered, uncertain-looking patrons who clapped politely drew disapproving glares.

"What the hell was *that* all about?" Carla whispered to me. "And what's the deal with the bongos?"

"Just experience it." I whispered back. "Don't analyse."

"This place is too weird for me." She said.

"You wanna go?" I asked.

"Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. We can go somewhere else."

"Now you're talking."

I picked up the check, and we were on our way without another word.

"Whew!" Carla breathed out once we were back on the street. She shook her head.

"Not exactly your style, was it?" I said as we started walking.

"No kidding. Have you ever seen anything like that in your life?"

"Sure. I've been into a few beatnik joints in my time. The first time on a fake ID."

"Whoever heard of getting up in a nightclub and reciting *poetry*?!" Carla exclaimed.

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's kind of the point. Oh, well. Before your time, I guess. So where do you want to go now?"

"I thought you'd never ask." She said with a shadow of a smile.

The next morning I dragged myself down to the docks to meet with Glottis before he set out.

"What happened to *you*?" He asked.

"Late night." I managed to say as I massaged my temples. "New girl."

"What'd she do, use a bungee cord?" Glottis asked.

"Just dragged me to every bar in town. You'd think prohibition was coming back the way she packed it away."

"Might not be a bad idea, Manny." He said.

"So you all set?" I asked. "Got the money and everything?"

"Sure, and I got a pen and pad to write down phone numbers."

"Okay, I'll see you in a few days." I said with an approving nod.

"Okay, Manny." Glottis said as he climbed into the *Bone Wagon*. "Bye!"

He peeled away from the docks with a squeal that nearly split my head open.

Around 10 o'clock Celso turned up and we went into Velasco's office. Velasco wordlessly handed me his port log. Maybe it was just me, but I thought Velasco seemed perversely pleased. I turned to the entry Glottis had told me about and showed it to Celso.

"Your wife sailed out of here two months ago with another man." I said as gently as I could.

Celso shook his head slowly as he read the entry. "Oh, Manny… is there a greater constant in nature than the treachery of woman?" He asked me sadly.

"It's a tough break, junior." Velasco said with an air of indifference. "But you've gotta face it."

"Forget about her, Celso." I advised.

"Have you forgotten about yours?" He asked me as he closed the log. "I'm going after my wife."

"There's a ship sailing for Puerto Zapato the day after tomorrow." Velasco said. "Why don't you go down to the steamship offices and get a ticket?"

"I'll do that." Celso said as he handed the log back to Velasco. "I guess tomorrow is the last day we'll be working together, Manny." He said as he turned back to me. "Lopez won't be happy to be losing me so soon, but that can't be helped. Goodbye, Velasco."

When Celso had gone, Velasco slapped his knee and cackled gleefully. "Finally got rid of that salty scumbag!" He said. "Wish I'd known I had what'd make him go all this time, though."

"I think he's pretty broken up…" I said, feeling a little sorry for him. Velasco waved my compassion away as he turned back to his desk. "He's goin', that's the important thing."

"Well, I'll see you around." I said as I let myself out. I couldn't quite figure out why Velasco held such a disliking for Celso, but some people just don't quite mix. I kicked around town for a while before it was time for my shift to start.

Celso was right about Lopez not being happy. When I went in to work the next day he took me immediately into his office.

"I almost wish you hadn't told him about his wife." He groused. "The kind of turnover I've been having lately has been sheer murder." Lopez gave a lengthy sigh. "Oh, well. Can't be helped. Manny, I'd like you to take over the opening spot, if you'll do it. It'll mean getting up at an ungodly hour, but there's a big raise in it for you."

"Sounds good to me." I said. It wasn't like I had much else to do during the day.

"Not right away, though." Lopez went on. "I'd rather open for a while myself rather than close up again anytime soon." He cussed quietly under his breath. "Just when I was getting caught up on the books, too."

"Can I help?" I asked.

"Got a head for figures?"

"Depends on whose."

Lopez opened his jaw for a moment, and then quickly closed it. "Okay Manuel, enough joking." He finally said. "Shoo!"

That afternoon was quite a surprise – Toto Santos actually said hello to me without any prompting. And soon after that, Celso left. He didn't say much more than 'bye', except to thank me for my help. That night, Carla showed up about half-an-hour before closing and we chatted while I did what needed to be done. I walked her over to her job and blew 20 bucks on a couple of races. Then I went over to the Blue Casket for an hour of so, but Olivia didn't recite anything that night. I was obviously getting into a rut, but a little idea was really starting to grow in the back of my mind.

Chapter 13 – The LSA Takes Root

Glottis returned after a few days, apparently having had a great time. He brought me a list of phone numbers from various stops and said that Lola said "Hi". He didn't see anything of Domino or his agents, but Glottis did hear from a few people that he wasn't the first to ask about Meché. I was going to give my contacts a few days before phoning them. Glottis went back to doing odd jobs for Velasco and tinkering with the *Bone Wagon*.

A couple of days after Glottis returned I found a message for me at the hotel saying that Lola had phoned up while I was at work. After we exchanged pleasantries she broke her news to me.

"I got some bad news for you, Manny."

"Uh-oh." I said, feeling a sinking-sensation in my stomach-cavity. "What is it?"

"Yesterday some guy in a DOD car drove up and asked about Mercedes Colomar. I didn't tell him nothin', but Eddie told him about you and Glottis. The guy paid Eddie to let *him* know if she turned up."

I really didn't like the sound of that. "How much money?" I asked.

"It was a big wad, Manny. Big bills, too. And he had a lot left over."

"So Domino's goons are going up and down the line bribing people." I said with a sigh. "That's just great."

"What's really goin' on here, Manny?" Lola asked.

"I wish I knew, baby. But I need to find Meché first. I let her down once already."

"You'll find her." Lola said comfortingly. "But I've gotta go. If I hear anything, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Lola." I said. "I hope there are more people like you out there than there are like Eddie."

"Me, too." She replied quietly. "Bye."

Well, that was pretty lousy news, but I wasn't sure just how bad it was. On the one hand, Domino must have been getting pretty desperate if he was paying people for information they *might* give him someday. That meant he wasn't having any better luck finding Meché than I was; but on the other hand, he had the edge. There was no way I could match his tactic, even if my long 'slump' hadn't just about tapped me out. I was willing to bet that wad of dough didn't come out of Domino's pocket, either. Whoever was behind him must have been providing it, and that was a significant piece of news.

I went back to my room. It was time to make a report.

Salvador,

I sent Glottis out to make another search for Meché. He went back to El Marrow by the way we came to reconnect with the people we encountered before, and he came back by a different route to make some fresh new contacts. No one admits to having seen Meché, but several say that they've spoken to others who are looking for her. I've just been told that Domino or his agents are paying some people large bribes to let them know if they ever see her. This lets us know a few things.

Firstly, Domino knows he has competition. If people are telling me others are looking for Meché, we can be sure they're doing the same for Domino. Second, whoever is behind all this must have access to DOD funds. One of my contacts described the bribes as large wads of bills. I suppose the bribes could be coming from the sales of stolen Double-N tickets, but I bet these guys would embezzle if they could rather than dip into their own kitty bank. Third, Domino's search is being conducted like a legitimate DOD operation, the same contact having described a car with DOD markings. Domino's position must be very secure if he can divert agents for this. I wonder if Meché's gotten wind of this somehow and is lying low.

As for recruiting LSA agents in Rubacava… I've got a few ideas, but I'm going to watch and wait before making any moves. For right now, Glottis and I are going to have to carry the ball by ourselves.

Manny.

Several days later, I got a reply from Salvador.

Manuel,

I am sorry to hear that you have not heard from your Meché. You must be patient, and let your heart remain open. If it is meant to be, then you will someday be reunited.

Having studied your latest report carefully, I must congratulate you. Your idea of using your driver to conduct your search is inspired. Not only is he impervious to anything our enemies could inflict upon you, he is also known to Miss Colomar.

Eva and I agree it is probable that our enemies are able to divert DOD funds for their operations. This insight gives us a possible means of identifying the people we seek. We have expanded our search of the DOD network to include financial transactions. Since we need only look for tampering within the last few weeks to locate the source of these bribes, the task may be relatively simple… although Eva remains convinced that seeking discrepancies between work orders and client records will produce more certain results. Naturally, we continue to work on all fronts.

It is unfortunate that we cannot match the tactics of our enemies, but the LSA lacks their financial resources.

Remain cautious in seeking out new agents. We trust your judgement, but keep in mind what you have learned – for our enemies may have subverted potential recruits. Look for genuine revolutionary instincts.

For the revolution,
Salvador Limones.

I was amused to see that Salvador still thought I was in love with Meché, despite my blatant denial.
Otherwise, his letter actually made me feel pretty good. Not about the lousy situation I was in, of course – but for making a contribution to the LSA. In the back of my mind I had begun to feel like I was just playing a secret agent. But here I had learned something, and Sal was taking it into his calculations.

I began to wonder what was next on my agenda. The LSA had a few problems, mainly lack of manpower and lack of money. There wasn't much I could do about the latter, although I still had that vague little notion germinating somewhere in my head that I'll explain later. Sal and Eva were looking for new recruits, and I was supposed to be doing the same. But what the hell were 'genuine revolutionary instincts'?

I had told Carla about my youthful flirtation with Marx. I had been pretty serious about it at the time, but now I looked at it as just a phase. 'Who *was* that kid?' I would think to myself later in life. I got so detached that I just couldn't relate to that earlier, more passionate version of myself. What I still didn't know was whether I had been a revolutionary or just a punk thumbing his nose up at a world he didn't like. So how the heck could I tell the difference in anyone else?
On the other hand, I had also told Carla that Marxism was basically just about justice. THAT, I still cared about… maybe I cared even more now than when I was alive. Maybe that's all I needed to look for.
Salvador never quizzed me on ideology, yet he seemed to be taking *me* as a genuine revolutionary, which I didn't think I was. I was just really burned up about what had happened to Meché. And to all the others, whoever they were. I wanted the LSA to find the bastards responsible and take care of them. But no matter how hard I thought about these things, I wasn't any closer to understanding what Sal really wanted from me.
That just left me with whatever I could manage to work out on my own.

I was hanging around the Blue Casket regularly those days. Without Carla, of course, since she swore she'd never go back. I went there mainly because I wanted to hear Olivia recite her poetry, but after that first night she mostly kept off the stage. I was also keeping watch on the three guys Carla and I overheard that first night. Not exactly deliberately – not at first. I just had revolution on my mind, and they were usually in the club. Sometimes they were by themselves, and sometimes there were others with them. But those particular three were always together – Alexi, Slisko, and Gunnar. Whenever I could manage it, I got a table next to theirs and listened in as well as I could.

Lopez quickly got tired of opening the automat, so I moved to that spot and he did the closing for a while. That meant I saw less of night-owl Carla and more of Velasco, along with having to weather the full brunt of the lunch crowd. I also had to take delivery of supplies first thing in the morning. I was very interested to see that the delivery guy was one of the three regulars from the Blue Casket. His name was Alexi, and he was an interesting study. He was definitely the most purely ideological of the three, and tended to rein in the other two when they were in disagreement.
I learned from Velasco that Alexi and his friends were trying to organize the dock workers, which struck me as a little strange.

"Isn't there a union already?" I asked him, feeling certain I remembered Velasco mentioning the union the day I'd arrived into town.

"Sure." Velasco laughed back. "And it's as crooked as that cat racetrack."

"I get it." I said. "The union bosses do all right for themselves, don't they?"

"That's about the size of it, son. I keep away from 'em as much as I can, but Alexi's little gang wants to take 'em on."
That was very interesting. Perhaps they did more than just talk about revolution.

"Yeah?" I went on. "What exactly are they doing?"

"Shouting a lot, mostly. 'Lay down your tools' and that sort of thing. The union's muscle keep kicking them off the docks, but they keep coming back."

"Are they getting anywhere?" I genuinely wanted to know.

"No, not really." Velasco said with a shake of his head. "Oh, well… some of the Sea Bees listen in now and again, but the union has the dock area pretty well under control. They even shut down the bar that used to be situated down there – 'The Rusty Anchor' it was called – so they wouldn't have a place to congregate or whatever the hell it was they called it."

"So what do you think about it all?"

"I think they're a bunch of damn fools, that's what I think! Just tilting at windmills, as they say. And they keep coming back for more! Idiots, the lot of them."

Velasco may have thought Alexi and his friends were idiots, but what I had already learned was giving me ideas. I started to actively look for Alexi's group in the Blue Casket, and kept an eye out for them on the docks whenever I'd meet up with Glottis. I didn't say much to Alexi when he came into the Rub-a-Mat in the mornings, though. I just kept things on business – partly because I didn't want to spook him by tipping my hand too early, and partly because I felt the need to brush up on Marx, Lenin and Trotsky since that seemed to pretty much define the doctrinal stream they were swimming in. But eventually I'd seen and heard enough. One morning, I finally decided to break the ice with him.

"So are you getting anywhere with the dock workers?" I tried to ask casually.
Alexi just stared at me coldly. "I know you've been spying on us. Are you trying to freak-out our plans for organizing labour and rat us out to your pal, Police Chief Logan?" He said.

I was surprised to hear Rubacava's Chief of Police brought into this.

"I don't think I've ever even *seen* Logan." I said, honestly. "And I'm not spying on you."

"Then what are you up to, cube?" He asked. "You're always in the club, you hang around the docks… and don't try to jive me that it's only about that Glottis cat… and now you're quizzing me. You expect me to believe that *isn't* spying?"

"Maybe I'm just interested in revolution." I held my ground. "Maybe I didn't know the best way to get in with you guys. I'm on your side, not Logan's."

"You look like a tool of the Man to me, Calavera." Alexi hissed. "What do you know about the revolution?"

"I believe in justice. If that isn't enough for you, then *you're* the tool here." Well, that only made him angry. He got up close and looked straight down at me, even though he wasn't that much taller.

"You just keep your distance, Clyde." He snarled quietly, and left.

"Well…" I admitted to myself after he'd gone. "I didn't handle *that* too well…"

"I don't know why you're so interested in those guys." Glottis said to me when I told him the story that afternoon. "Everybody in town knows 'em. You keep telling me to be discreet Manny, so tell me what's so 'discreet' about hollerin' up and down the docks all day long?" His ears twitched in annoyance.

"Nothing, and that's kind of the point." I replied. "No one's going to suspect them of working for the LSA if they keep on making the same old noise."

"Does anyone know the LSA even exists except you and me?" Glottis asked. I shrugged. "I don't know. People will, eventually."

"Okay, then. People might overlook these guys if they're *too* obvious. But besides that…?"

"They've got convictions. They're trying to change things. That's pretty rare around here. Most people just want to get out of the Land of the Dead as quickly as they can. Alexi and his friends are just about the only group I've seen in Rubacava who are different."

"I dunno, Manny." Glottis said with a shake of his head. "I've heard their speeches, and I don't think fixin' the DOD is what these guys are after."

"I don't really care what they're after." I shrugged it off. "If they care at all about justice, then maybe they can be useful to the cause."

"But you can't even talk to 'em!" Glottis pointed out.
That got me. I sighed before going on. "Yeah, I know. I don't know what to do about that."

"Then maybe you should forget about them. Maybe Miss Ofrenda would work out better." Glottis said.

"Olivia?" I asked in surprise. "What do you know about her?" I didn't recall ever mentioning her name to Glottis.

"I've met her." He answered. "Max heard about the *Bone Wagon* from someone. Every Monday morning he let's me go racing 'round the kitty track. There are a few other demons in town with fast cars, and we keep Max's employees entertained. The winner gets paid extra." Glottis explained.

"So how long has *this* been going on?" I asked in surprise.

"About a month. That's where I've met Miss Ofrenda; at the track. She's a nice lady. I think she'd be good for the LSA."

"Maybe you're right." I said, but I had been thinking recently that she might be useful for other reasons – such as a fixer for that little idea still brewing slowly in my mind. "Do you think you could arrange to introduce me?"
It didn't seem likely that I could have had the discussion I wanted at her club.

"Sure, if you can be at the track by 9 AM on any Monday." Glottis said.

"Oh, sure." I said sarcastically. "How do I manage that and hold down my job? We *still* don't have anyone to close. I can't get away!"

"Well, when you get someone else, maybe you can take a Monday off sometime."

"Yeah, maybe that'll have to do…"

That evening I went down to the Blue Casket and decided to make my presence felt by the whole gang of 'commies', figuring I'd have better luck with all three together in a public place – less chance of a big scene. Or, if nothing else, I'd let Alexi know his reaction earlier wasn't going to deter me.
The three had a table to themselves near the stage. I went straight over to them and said, loud enough to be heard over the music at least two tables away, "*Buenos Noches*, comrades!"
Alexi gave me a poisonous glare, while Slisko snarled. "Oh, fade out!" And turned his back on me.
Not really a great start.
Gunnar looked a little embarrassed for his two friends. "Hey Manny, no offence." He said, and he sounded like he meant it. "We don't have time for establishment-types like yourself."
I thought that was pretty funny, actually. "What makes you guys think I'm so 'establishment'?"
Slisko turned toward me only long enough to snap: "You smell like bacon and oppression, man!"

"*Qué?*" I asked. I thought I remembered the old beatnik slang pretty well; but even so, sometimes Slisko didn't make an ounce of sense. I took an empty chair from the next table and sat down.
Alexi didn't like that at all.

"Beat it, dinner jacket!" He snapped, banging his fist on the table.

"Dinner jacket? Does this look like a tuxedo to you?" I asked, tugging at the lapel of my cheap sports blazer.
Slisko shared a sneering look with Alexi and said, "I hear the driver of a station wagon, the owner of a pasta maker." Alexi started chuckling softly at this. Slisko went on. "The hollowed-out husk of a cat who remembers to button down his collar but forgets his brother in the street!"

"Sorry, Manny." Gunnar said without Slisko's rancour. "There's just no room for the bourgeois in *our* revolution." He stood up and addressed the other two as he left the table. "I'm gonna get a foamer."

"Not a bad idea." I replied, and stood to follow him.

"We don't care *why* you're going." Slisko spat after me. "Just go, man, *go!*"
I ignored his retort and trailed after Gunnar. When he reached the bar he got the attention of the tall, slightly stooped bartender (who, despite the obvious darkness of the club, wore thick sunglasses) and ordered a beer.
I ordered the same.
After taking a lengthy pull from his glass, Gunnar glared at me without any intended malice and asked, "Just what are you after, cube?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked, curious to know just what would seem obvious to him.

"Alexi told us how you buttonholed him this morning." He said, shaking his head in a dismissive way. "Talk about four bars past obvious! Why not just flash a buzzer while you're at it?"

"So you think I want to rap on you to the heat. Is that your brilliant idea or did Alexi think of it for you?"
Gunnar bristled. "Listen here, Clyde." He thumped me lightly in the chest with one hand. "I *listen* to Alexi, but I do my *own* thinking."

"That's close!" I said, ignoring Gunnar's hostility. "I've listened to you cats long enough to know that Alexi does all the real thinking. Okay, sure…" I conceded before Gunnar had the chance to interrupt. "You have a *few* ideas of your own, but when Alexi lays down the law…"
He didn't let me finish. "Alexi knows the dialectic like no one. Get it?" He hissed, taking an almost-defiant pull from his glass.

"Yeah, I get it." I said in a hard tone. "I get that the dialectic is a process, not a doctrine. That it's a give and take among ideas, among tactics, all tending toward one goal: justice."
Although Gunnar projected a frown, he went on with a bitter laugh. "Justice for *who*?"

"*Everyone*." I said. That same frown was now very apparent over Gunnar's rigid features. "Well, maybe you *don't* have the revolutionary instinct Salvador is looking for." I sighed.
Gunnar appeared both angry and puzzled, his phantom frown wavering somewhat. Before he could make any sort of reply, I took my beer and went in search of an empty table. Olivia, who was sitting at the end of the bar with a very out-of-place man in a sharp business suit, gave me a curious stare as I stomped past.
I didn't bother acknowledging her.

Chapter 14 – Lola

The next morning, Alexi arrived as usual. He was pretty sullen and I kept strictly to business. As I was taking the delivery, I was suddenly distracted by a tapping at a window. I looked over but only saw a pigeon on the sill outside. I hastily checked over what Alexi had brought to make sure nothing was missing.
When I glanced at the window again, the pigeon was still out there. It seemed to be looking right at me. I signed for the stuff, and Alexi went on his way.
I went outside and the pigeon kept on staring directly at me. It was a little eerie.
I slowly reached out my hand, and the little bird held its ground. It let me pick it up. There was a small cylindrical tube attached to one leg. I took the pigeon inside and pulled the tiny slip of paper from the message tube.

> Manuel,
>
> It is indeed a great day for the revolution! Say *hola* to little Manny, the first enlisted messenger to serve the LSA! Please feed him some bread crumbs and send him back quickly, so we may know that our maiden flight was a success.

"Well, how about that?" I chuckled. "*Hola*, little Manny."
I tore a corner off Alexi's invoice and wrote a short reply:

> Salvador,
>
> Congratulations, Sal. Manny did his job beautifully.

I put the note into the tube, fed the bird a few crumbs, carried him outside and released him to the wind. I watched him fly in the direction of El Marrow until he was entirely out of sight.
When he was gone I turned to go back into the automat, but stopped when I saw a woman standing a few yards away – she had also been watching the pigeon. Her back was to me, but she seemed familiar somehow.
In fact, I was convinced I knew who she was.
"Meché…?" I said as I approached her. She turned around and showed me her youthfully lopsided face.
"Sorry, Manny. Just me." Lola replied.
"Oh…" I said, feeling both embarrassed and deeply disappointed. "Well, it's good to see you, too. What brings you to Rubacava?"
"I needed a change, Manny."
"Why don't we go inside?" I said casually, not wanting to be overheard in the open. I let Lola inside the Rub-a-Mat. "We're not officially open yet, but what the hell, huh?"

Lola perched herself on a stool. "What's the story on the bird?" She asked.

"Oh, a friend of mine in El Marrow raises pigeons. Kind of a hobby. I get notes from him every now and then. What about you? How'd you get here?"
Lola snapped open her purse and pulled out a wad of money.

"It's a little smaller now, but this is what the guy in the DOD car gave to Eddie. I took it."

"You shouldn't have done that." I said as I fetched her a cup of coffee.

"I *had* to get out of that dump! This won't get me on a ship, but it sure gets me a lot closer."

"Well, I'm sure that little road stop wasn't the most exciting place in the world, but was it really that bad?"

"I got tired of Eddie always treating me like his kid sister." Lola shrugged.

"What was up with that, anyway?" I asked as I got my own cup and a couple of bagels. I handed one to Lola.

"I don't know. Men are always treating me like their kid sister or daughter or *something*. It was like that when I was alive, too."
I figured the conversation was heading for a few rough turns that I wasn't prepared to take at this point, so I steered our discussion elsewhere.

"So have you just gotten into town?" I asked.

"Yeah. I was walking up from the bus terminal when you came out with the pigeon."

"Well if you need a job, we've got an opening here. You'll have to talk to Lopez this afternoon, but I think you'd be perfect. Didn't you say you knew him?"

"I don't really know, Manny. I don't think I want to do any more waitressing." She said.

"You wouldn't be, actually." I assured her. "This place is an automat, after all. The customers serve themselves. We just have to keep the joint clean and stocked. You don't even have to talk to the customers most of the time if you don't want to, but it gets pretty boring if you don't."

"Would we work together?" She asked.

"Sure, for a couple of hours anyway."

"That's fine with me." She replied with a nod. "Where do you stop around here?"

"A place called the Normanby. It's fairly nice, for the price."

"So the Normanby it is. Eddie's wad will last me, even if I don't get the job."

"You'll get it. I'll put in a good word for you with Lopez if that's even necessary. He's sick of closing up, anyway. You're as good as in."

"Where do I hang my hat?" She asked.
I laughed for the first time in I-don't-know-how-long. "Listen, I don't want to be rude, but I've got to finish getting this place ready to open. You can stay put, if you want. I'm not trying to kick you out – I just gotta dance with this mop for a while."

"Once a wallflower, always a wallflower, I guess." She said.

"You?" I smiled. "I doubt it."
Lola merely shook her head.

"Oh, man!" I suddenly exclaimed. I had forgotten to take the food into the kitchen. I got that taken care of before Brock came in and blew a gasket.
I then returned to my mop, while Lola was trying to hide her laughter behind her hands.

"Yeah, yeah." I chuckled. "I'm sure it's very entertaining."

"You have no idea." She said with a smile. "How you scurried!"
Funny as it was, I forced myself to scurry some more to make up the time I had spent talking with Lola.

Lopez remembered Lola from years back and hired her on the spot, then promptly announced he'd be taking the next couple of days off. The poor guy was getting exceedingly frazzled and I didn't think it was just the staffing problems he'd been having. I took it upon myself to show Lola the ropes.

"There's a guy who comes in here around mid-afternoon every day." I told her. "Sometimes mid-mornings too, depending on what kind of a night he's had. Anyway, he's a real grump and a special project of mine. I make a point of trying to draw him out. I don't make myself a nuisance, just enough of an effort to connect with him."

"Any luck?" She asked curiously.

"Not a whole lot." I admitted. "I've mainly got him to the point of saying hello without prompting. You have no idea what kind of an accomplishment *that* is. Anyway, if you don't mind, I'd like you to work on him too. Just say hello, ask him how he is, that sort of thing. Maybe someday he'll volunteer two consecutive sentences!"

"So what's his name? What does he look like?"

"His name is Toto Santos – and believe me, you won't have any trouble picking him out."

When Toto finally did arrive, Lola nudged me and whispered, "*That's* not him, is it?"

"Hole in one, sweetheart. Let me see what you can do with him." I replied.

"Okay, Manny." She said and took a deep breath. Lola marched over to Toto as he was getting his *lengua* and said brightly, "Hi there, Mr. Santos!"
He jumped slightly, and briefly replied. "Just Toto."

"Okay, Toto. My name's Lola." She stuck out her hand.
Toto slowly took her hand in his and Lola shook it. His arm just flapped around limply in Lola's grip.

"I'm working here now, so you'll be seeing a lot of me." She said with a smile.

"Sure. Excuse me." He said haggardly, and left.
Lola looked back at me. "Did I do alright, Manny?" She asked a little worriedly.

"Baby," I said sincerely, "you were perfect!"

And I wasn't kidding. After a few days, Lola was getting Toto into actual – if short – conversations.
Meanwhile, Lopez got back to managing the Rub-a-Mat. I gave him a few days more before asking for a Monday morning off. He was a little cranky about it, but he quickly apologized for being so testy.
I told him not to worry about it, but noticed he was still on edge.

"Are you alright, *mano*?" I asked. "I mean, this is a pretty sedate little business, even when understaffed. I hope I'm not being too personal."

"No, you're not." Lopez said. "And to tell you the truth, I don't know what's the matter with me. I used to enjoy this place. I liked meeting new people as they passed through town. But now… now I don't know."

"Maybe you're ready to move on." I suggested.

"Is that your professional opinion?" He asked.
I just shrugged. "Not really. I only saw people at the beginning of their journeys. Except for the DOD people, that is. But it sure sounds to me like you're restless."

"Maybe I am." He admitted. "I've been in Rubacava a long time. I stopped to earn money for passage over the sea and got to like the place."

"Rubacava is quite a town." I said. "Do you think you've got all the money you need?"
Lopez laughed. "Oh, more than enough. I've done very well with my little automat… but maybe you're right. Maybe it really is time to move on. I'd hate to just abandon the place, though."

"Actually, I'm kind of interested in it." I said, half-admittedly. "I thought it was a nice piece of property ever since I first saw it."

"Really?" Lopez said as if the idea had just occurred to him. "You'd be interested in taking the Rub-a-Mat over?"

"Sure. I mean, if you really *are* moving on. If not, I'm fine just working here." I said, trying to give him the soft-sell.

"You know…" Lopez replied thoughtfully. "I don't think I'd mind leaving the place so much if you took it over. You've got drive, a strong sense of responsibility, and you're great with people. I think maybe I'll give it some serious thought."

"Great!" I said. "So, about that day off…?"

"Okay, Calavera." He replied with a laugh. "Take next Monday off. It might be your last vacation for a long time."

Chapter 15 – Making Connections

Glottis said he'd let the guys at the gate know to let me in that Monday, since Feline Meadows wasn't open to the public on Mondays. I got in before nine o'clock and spoke with Glottis for a little while as he was preparing the *Bone Wagon*.
There were about a dozen other demons with hotrods there. They all had some pretty nice cars, but the *Bone Wagon* stood out. Feline Meadows employees were trickling into the seats.
Glottis pointed out Olivia when she arrived. I went over to the section she was in. She was in a seat down towards the front row, and I just walked by her and leaned against the railing.
The demons' exhibition started with a drag race. They did four races, of which Glottis won three. Then they pulled a ten-lap race. When they began, Glottis fell way behind.
"Glottis, what the hell are you doing!?" I thought to myself. At the end of the first lap, he was dead last. "C'mon *mano*, floor it! What's wrong with you!?"
He kept behind for a while, and then suddenly crept up to second place. In the very final lap, the *Bone Wagon* leapt forward. I held my breath as the race came to a close. Glottis finished well ahead of the other demons, and it was only then I realized he had been showing off.

When I was done recuperating I became dully aware that Olivia was standing at the railing next to me.
"Ye hornèd beast a friend of yours, man?" She asked dryly.
"Yeah." I replied. "He's – was – my driver."
"That's a wailing chariot he's got there." She cooed.
"It's what Glottis was made to do."
"You've become quite a regular at the club, Calavera." She said, completely changing the subject. "What happened to the frill in the heels you were with the first time?"
"Carla? Oh, your club's just not her scene."
"I can imagine." Olivia said casually. "The Blue Casket is from the wrong side of the Man – not the place for nice little bourgeois girls."
"Your poem really threw her. How come you haven't gone up much since then?"
"Oh, Manny!" Olivia laughed. "That would be like the whole place was just a big temple set up to worship me! I have to pace myself, you know."
"Not into the cult of personality thing, huh?"
"You got it, daddy. I like to bring in fresh talent."
"Yeah? Why don't you have an open mic night? I remember a couple of clubs I went to when I was alive that did that. Of course, some of the readings were pretty bad, but those joints were more than just places to hang out and *talk* revolution."
"That might not be a bad idea, actually."

"Of course, sometimes people can be a little timid. You might have to help get the ball rolling."

"You're shameless. Still, it might help business." She said with another cold laugh. Olivia then gave me an appraising look. "Somehow you don't really seem like the type that'd be into 'the beat' scene."

"All my black turtlenecks are at the drycleaners." I said as Olivia gave a low chuckle. "I gotta admit though, the Blue Casket is more of a nostalgia trip for me. There isn't really any place in town I could honestly go for, so I may have to start it up myself."

"Really?" She asked, a little interested. "What kind of joint do you have in mind?"

"Oh, it's all a little vague still." I replied with a shrug. "But it'd be a nightclub, of course. A restaurant, bar, small casino. Very upscale."

"Sinking into the bourgeoisie already, aren't you man?"

"That's where the money is, and I can think of better uses for it."
She laughed again. "I hear you, daddy." Then, she suddenly sobered. "But a casino… you'd be horning in on Maximino's racket."
Which was my concern exactly. The straightforward approach wasn't likely to work, so I affected breezy unconcern.

"I don't think a roulette wheel or two is gonna put much of a dent in *this* place." I said.
It was Olivia's turn to shrug. "You don't know Maxie." She said, pausing just long enough to light a cigarette. Outside of her club, she didn't bother with the holder. "He might suddenly decide he's been thinking about going into the casino racket for years."

"Maybe you could help me get on Max's good side."

"He might want a little consideration." Olivia said. Now we were getting to the heart of things.

"How much?"

"It's not that simple, man. Max might stick with the protection scam, or he could demand a straight cut of the take, or maybe he'd just want a favour for one of his associates." She shrugged again.

"Well, it's still early." I said, trying to act like I didn't care. "I'm not even sure yet whether I can get the property I have my eye on."

"Which property are you looking at?"

"The Rub-a-Mat. Lopez might be moving on, maybe."

"That's pretty close to the Blue Casket." Olivia said warily.

"Yeah, but we wouldn't be competing for the same customers." I said reassuringly.

"So you say, but unless you want some serious trouble, you'd better swear to stay off my turf and mean it."

"No problem." I said, crossing my sternum. "And besides, you might get some spillover from my place when people want to slum it a little."

"I suppose I could find a better use for their money, too." Olivia took a thoughtful drag on her cigarette. "Tell you what Calavera, if you can convince *me* you're straight, maybe I can persuade Max to go easy on you. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Remember, that's 'if'." She went on. "You've gotta work *hard* to get into bed with me, daddy."
She blew a stream of smoke directly at me, and walked gracefully away. When she'd disappeared down an exit tunnel I shook myself out of it and headed out of a different tunnel as if to prove I didn't need to follow her.

Since I had the whole day off, I spent the time wandering around town, taking in some of the few sights I hadn't seen yet, and finishing up down at the docks with the intention to drop in on Glottis. I got distracted by the sight of Gunnar sitting on a pile of discarded machinery behind a warehouse. He was reading a small, red book.
He looked up at me, made a show of sighing loudly, and went back to reading as I approached.
"I hope that's not Che Guevara you're reading." I said as I got close.
He tried to give me a stern look of Bolshevik disapproval, but gave it up pretty quickly and laughed. "No, Marx's Amsterdam speech."
I perched myself on some rusting iron and asked, "Aren't you worried about being labelled a Revisionist?"
"Not likely." He replied. "I think you've got the wrong idea about us, Clyde."
It was my turn to laugh. "I show sincere knowledge and interest in what you're reading and you *still* take me for a cube." I shook my head. "What does it take, *mano*?"
"More than you've got. A lot more."
"Oh, really? I think if you're digging that speech, then I must have made quite an impression the other night. Otherwise you wouldn't be reading into something that argued a position Lenin declared invalid."
"Alright." He confessed with a self-conscious grumble. "You got me. I was reminding myself of the unexpected directions the dialect can lead us. I suggested to Alexi and Slisko they do the same, but they just quoted Lenin at me."
"Ah, so *that's* why Alexi was so grumpy this morning."
Gunnar's chuckle died away as something drew his attention. I looked over in the direction of his gaze and saw Slisko about fifteen feet away looking as sour as ever. Gunnar stood without a word and walked over to Slisko, who snapped something at him. Gunnar, louder than he needed to be, replied with: "He's not *that* bad, Sly."
Slisko said something else, obviously more pungent than his first remark, to which Gunnar shrugged and walked away. Slisko glared venomously at me and then followed his friend.

Lopez seemed distracted when I went back to work the next day. I gave him his space. He had a lot of thinking to do, and he took his time doing it. Days passed. I sent Glottis out again to search for Meché, but there was still no news and he found it harder to talk to people than before. They were becoming increasingly more reluctant to open up, either from being repeatedly questioned or having had their silence bought by Domino.
I had similar trouble with my follow-up calls.

On the home front, my relationship with Carla was evolving from just friends into something a little bit more.
But there was one small hitch: Meché. Not that Carla could be in any way jealous, I thought. I mean, how could she be jealous of a woman whose whereabouts were unknown, and for whom I had only a professional interest? But by this time, everyone in Rubacava knew I wanted to locate someone called Mercedes Colomar, and I think for Carla, Meché was almost the 'Other Woman'. It didn't help that as time kept on passing, I kept getting more and more down about having no news about Meché.

One evening I took Carla to a quiet little restaurant in Rubacava's old quarter – a dense cluster of Plateresque buildings tucked into a little notch in the cliffs near the docks. It was one of those neighbourhoods where time had done its damage and moved on, only to be followed up by chic entrepreneurs who renovated buildings into ironic shops and sardonic bistros, all having a kind of shabby elegance that could be likened to an aging starlet in a debutante's gown. Carla simply ate it up. I picked that particular restaurant because it didn't have a bar and served nothing stronger than wine.
We were seated at a small table near a wall, tucked in between two suits of armour from the wrong time period. A Gypsy violinist meandered among the tables. It seemed the owners were strongly confused about geography.
We got our drinks, ordered our food, and I quickly settled into a quiet funk because it was nearly two months since I'd arrived in Rubacava.
Carla clicked her fingertips on the tabletop, waiting patiently for me to say something.
"Bad day?" She asked eventually, sounding idly concerned.
I shifted to sit up a little straighter in my chair and reached for my wine glass, which was filled with something white and a little too sweet for my tastes – possibly Riesling, although who-knows-how when not even grapes grow in the Land of the Dead.
"No, about average." I answered. "I've been thinking about things and it's getting me down a little. I'm sorry." I elaborated with some moody silence.
Carla picked up her purse and opened it. She took out a shiny penny and pushed it across the table towards me. It was a very cute gesture. I picked the coin up and turned it over in my fingers.
"These don't buy as much as they used to." I pointed out.
Carla shrugged lightly and projected a small smile. "Well, a penny for your troubles – it's still the going rate."
"Alright." I sighed as I put the penny down. "I've been thinking about unfinished business. *Old* unfinished business. And I think the older it gets, the harder it's going to be to finish it all."
Carla took a sip from her glass, but didn't say anything. Nice to see she knew how to sip. I went on.
"You know what the Petrified Forest is like. And after all this time, you have to wonder…" I said, full-knowing that I didn't have to specify what unfinished business I was talking about or why I should even be thinking about that damned forest.

Carla began to set her glass down quickly, then stopped. She then lowered it so that it didn't even click against the surface of the table.

"Yeah, Manny. I remember the forest." She said. "But it's not all that bad if you just keep your head." She paused for a few moments, staring at me. "Are you *sure* that Colomar dame is just old business to you?" The question seemed a little more insistent than its sisters had been in the past. "I'm starting to think she's your secret wife or something."

"No, nothing like that." I came close to snapping at her. First Salvador, now Carla. "She was only a client." Which wasn't exactly true, even if there was no romantic attachment. But I couldn't explain that to Carla – not if I wanted to keep my cover. "I've told you that before. I only met her that one time, you know."

"Yeah, I remember. But if she's just an old client, why are you making your demon buddy Glottis look for her?" Carla asked, sounding reasonable. "I mean, like, isn't your responsibility over with once someone's sent on their way? It's not like you're even a reaper any more; and anyway, even if her paperwork was messed up, like you always say, that wasn't *your* fault."

"No, maybe it's not." I said. "But you're only partly right. Sure, when someone walked out of my office, usually the only thing left to do was close the case and file the paperwork." I stopped and got a pack of cigarettes out of my breast pocket. I took my time taking one out and lighting it, giving myself more time to think over my next words. "But you're also partly wrong about it not being my fault. Some of it really was. I mean, I should've been able to pick up on what was happening, but I didn't. And because of that, Meché got the wrong idea about her situation." In reality, I should have been able to realize *that* from the day Domino turned up.

"Is that why you're carrying a torch for her? Because you feel guilty about making a mistake?" Carla asked.

"I am *not* carrying a torch." I replied with some added heat. "And I'm not exactly guilty. Call it a sense of responsibility. I owe it to her to fix things. I'd feel the same way if it had been… I don't know… let's say Velasco."

"You're very conscientious." She said a little coolly, either simply because of what I was saying to justify my concern for Meché, or maybe because I had just used Velasco as an example.

I reached out to her hand that rested on the table. She didn't withdraw it, but she didn't turn it over to clasp mine back either.

"Don't be that way." I said. "She might be lost, or worse. What kind of person would I be if that kind of thought didn't bother me?"

After a few moments of consideration she admitted. "Probably a pretty sorry excuse for one." Carla released a reluctant sigh. "But I *don't* like being taken out by men who talk about other women."

I shrugged and picked up the penny. "Want a refund?" I asked.

She pushed my hand gently back down. "Forget it. I accepted delivery without checking the invoice, didn't I?" She said with a faint smile.

"*Caveat emptor*." I knocked the ash from my cigarette and took my first real drag on it. "So what *do* you want to talk about?"

"You've had your turn." She said briskly, reaching over to take the cigarette out of my hand. "So now *I* get to talk about old boyfriends."

Conversations like that just aren't conducive to a completely harmonious relationship. On the other hand, I'm not sure there has ever been such a thing as a completely harmonious relationship.
Everyone has a past, and you just have to get along with that as best you can. At least, that was always my take on it.

Chapter 16 – Mr. Calavera's Dream Casino

One afternoon at the Rub-a-Mat, shortly after Lola started her shift, I heard a faint tapping at the window. There was another pigeon with different markings than Little Manny. I took the message from its tube, scribbled a short reply saying there were no developments on my ends, and sent the bird on its way. I read the message before going back inside.

> Manuel,
>
> We have found the head of the serpent! Using the computer access you have provided us, we picked up a thread that led us to the man who corrupted the Department of Death! His name is Hector LeMans. Once a small-time racketeer, he has grown fat and powerful by robbing the newly dead. Watch out for the name Hector LeMans, my friend – and be careful.
>
> Salvador.

That was something. And to think, we had part of the answer when I picked up that glowing trophy in Domino's office. But who was this Hector LeMans, I wondered. Could he be Eva's 'fatty in a fez' that she had once referred to?
I thought of writing Sal back to suggest my thoughts, but it seemed too remotely coincidental to be entirely possible. 'LeMans' wasn't a name I remembered from my time with the DOD, but it was a pretty big organization. Finally I shook my head, defeated in my solitary mental battle, and went back into the automat where I knew what was what. Or so I thought at the time.

"What's up?" Lola asked. "Bad news?"

"I'm not sure." I said. An honest – if worthless – answer.
Before Lola could say anything else, Lopez came down from his office and asked me to come up.

"I've decided to leave." He said abruptly when we were both seated at his desk. "Staying seems… pointless. I've already got a ticket. I sail for Puerto Zapato in a couple of weeks."

"Congratulations." I replied. I almost said 'mazel tov', but I remembered the temporal dimension in time.

"So, that just leaves this place to take care of. I had thought of just giving the Rub-a-Mat to you outright, but… well, suffice to say the dead can't just give away property and my lawyer says that just transferring the deed would only raise suspicions. Unwarranted, sure – but this is Rubacava, and the public prosecutor sees Maximino's hand in everything."

There was nothing I needed to say to that, especially since I wanted to get into Max's good graces through Olivia.

"All the same…" Lopez went on. "I won't be needing any more money where I'm going. I've put aside what I need to get me from Puerto Zapato to the end-of-the-line, and there's quite a bit left over." He slowly took some papers from his desk, and handed one to me. "This shows the market value of this place."

I looked it over, and it perfectly matched what I had already learned and expected.

"Looks fair." I said. "I think my bank will loan me what I need."

In fact, I already knew it would, having already talked to them while Lopez had been making up his mind. I actually only needed to get a loan for about half of it; the rest was coming from Glottis. His DOD salary had been small at best, but he'd been there a very long time and he'd led a simple life. He wanted to go in with me on the nightclub, so I promised to make him half-owner.

"Good." Lopez said. He then shook his skull. "It makes the whole transaction absurd, but before I go, I'm going to transfer my surplus to you. That will include what you're paying me for the automat."

I was totally floored.

"You're kidding me, right?" I asked.

"No. I'm not." He said, fixing his gaze on me. "I won't need money any more, and I'm sure you can find some good use for it." That was an understatement. "Come on, Manny." He continued, standing up. "Let's get this taken care of now. I'm sure you've already got that loan worked out."

I laughed as I got up. "Am I *that* transparent?"

"You're no fool." He answered. "You've got a head for business, Calavera – and only a fool wouldn't be prepared for my decision."

So we took care of it. In a short time, I was the new owner of the Rub-a-Mat. A few days later, Lopez took a cruise ship bound for the end of the line.

I can't pretend that I wasn't a little jealous.

I already had an architect lined up. After I took over the Rub-a-Mat, I dug up the original drawings and we talked about remodelling the place. Lopez had given me the money, as he promised, and I paid off my loan. The remainder of Lopez' money would go into the Rub-a-Mat's conversion, along with Glottis' money and another loan from my bank (who weren't much happy with how fast I'd paid off the first, but were ecstatic with the idea of yet another, far bigger loan). Lopez hadn't been kidding when he said he'd done well with the place, but I needed to get a second loan to cover the full costs.

After Lopez sailed I was almost ready to bring my plans to Olivia – but first I had to take care of Lola.

I came into the Rub-a-Mat while Lola was doing the close to talk to her about what I was planning.

"It'll take a while to get this place made over into a nightclub, and I'd like you to keep working for me. How long can you get by on Eddie's bribe?"

"A while, I guess. I haven't had to touch it since getting this job, and I've actually been able to save some of what I've been making." Lola said, giving a brief laugh.

"Well, if you stick with me baby, your savings will grow pretty fast. The house has the advantage, after all. I'd like you to help me supervise the construction work."

"I don't know nothin' about architecture or contractors or anything like that!" Lola protested.

"Neither do I." I shrugged. "But I'll need help keeping an eye on things, and I don't think Glottis is up to it. If you can get by on what you've got, then that's great. But if you don't want to dip into your stash, I understand." I said, tapping my skull lightly.

"I'll help out, Manny." Lola said earnestly. "When do we start?"

"Not sure. Before we do anything, I've got to make sure we're square with Olivia Ofrenda, so that's the first thing we've got to take care of."

"What's Olivia have to do with anything?"

"According to gossip – and the woman herself, by the way – she's in tight with Maximino. She's more-or-less promised that if she doesn't like my club, she'll get Max to throw his muscle around."

"Such a *sweet* little girl." Lola jibed.

"She's just protecting herself." I said, not knowing why I was defending her. "Not that she has anything to worry about. Her customers are riff-raff, while we're going after the elite. Or maybe it's the other way 'round…"

"So what do we do about her?"

"Well, I'll just show her my plans. That ought to convince her she's got nothing to worry about."

That Sunday, Lola and I went down to the Blue Casket while it was still closed. I figured that if Lola was going to help me keep an eye on things, she might as well be in on everything from the beginning. I spread my plans out on a table and Olivia looked them over.

"So we've got a restaurant and the bar here…" I said, pointing them out to her. "And the casino back here. We've got three roulette wheels, blackjack, poker and craps."

"No slot machines?" Olivia asked.

"No!" I said emphatically. "That crowd I *don't* need."

"And no video gambling." Lola added. "We don't even have public phones."

"There's nothing here that gets on Max's turf." I finished.

"Maybe…" Olivia said, taking a long drag from the cigarette in its usual holder. "I'm not really all that concerned about Max. The real question is, do *I* need to worry about you?"

"Look at the plans." I said. "I don't see anything here that would appeal to your customers. Do you?"

Olivia puffed on her cigarette for a while.

"No." She eventually said. "What else have you got?"

"What more do you want?" I asked, a little thrown. "Our two clubs might as well be on different planets!"

"What I want, Clyde, is for you to stay in your own backyard. Stick to fleecing the bourgeoisie and keep out of *my* part of town. Don't get ideas about expanding and *don't* advertise around the docks or in the radical papers. You get me?"

"Got it." I said calmly. "I don't mess with your stuff… and *you* don't mess with *mine*."

Olivia fixed her eye sockets coldly on me for a few seconds.

"Okay." She finally said. "I can live with that." She jabbed a skeletal finger at me. "But don't you *ever* cross me, man."

"No problem."

It took a little while to get the plans finalized and the contractors lined up. Then I shut down the Rub-a-Mat and we got started. The first step, of course, was getting the insides of the place ripped out. That was tough, emotionally. I liked the old place a lot, but you can't fund a revolution with an automat, no matter how well it's been doing.

Once the building was reduced to a shell, the reconstruction began.

One afternoon we got a visitor. I became suddenly aware of a few men standing at the edge of the property, and one of them in particular caught my eye. I went over to them and held out my hand to the one that stood out.

"You must be Maximino." I said. Olivia had sent word through Glottis to expect him to show up sometime (she was making a show of not speaking to me). "I'm Calavera. Manny Calavera."

Max took off his hat and did his best to grind my hand into a fine powder with his grip.

"Pleased ta meet ya, Calavera." He growled with a voice that sounded like sandpaper. "I would'a been at the ground breaking, but the track keeps me very busy."

"No problem." I said. "Would you gentlemen like to look the place over?"

Max turned slightly to his companions, but I sensed that his attention remained on me.

"Why don't you boys beat it, huh? Me and Mr. Calavera have business to discuss." Max said casually. The others took a couple of slow steps, and then stopped. Max whirled around and turned his suddenly-baleful gaze fully on them. "I said *scram*!" He snapped.

The little gang quickly melted away.

"They worry about me." Max went on as I led him over to the building entrance. "They're afraid they won't get their cut if I make money and they're not around."

"I guess it's good sometimes not to have an entourage." I said, risking a somewhat critical response.

"You're smart, Calavera." Max said, rewarding the chance I'd taken. "Very smart."

He gave me a manly thump on the shoulder. "You'll go far. So what've you got goin' here?"

"Just a little club, nothing big." I said, taking Max into the contractor's hut and showing him the plans. "Got a restaurant here, and a bar…"

"Got a mirror behind the bar?"

"Uh, well…"

"Better put one in, Manny. A bartender needs to know what's goin' on when his back is turned. One of the places I had in Chi didn't happen to have one. Ronny 'Pimple' Orwell got the drop on my boy 'cause there wasn't a mirror, an' suddenly I didn't have that place no more – so put a mirror *in*."

"I'll do that, Max." I said. He beamed at the familiarity. "Thanks for the heads-up. Let me tell you about the casino."

"You puttin' a casino in, too?" Max asked, like he didn't already know.

"Sure, it's back through here. We've got roulette, poker, craps and blackjack." I said, pointing to the plans.

"Hey, that's fuckin' *great* !" Max clapped me on the shoulder. "I've always said this burg needs casino gambling."

"Yeah…?" I said, a little wary of his hearty response.

"Sure. People keep sayin' to me, 'Hey, Maxie! Put a wheel in that lounge of yours!'" Max shook his head. "But that ain't for me. I'm in the kitty business all the way. This'll take some of the heat off. But where the hell are all the phones?"

"Well, there'll be one in my office, and one in the cloak-room…"

"No, no, *no*." Max said with an impatient shake of his skull. "Where the *customers* can get at 'em."

"Oh, well… if someone wants to bet on a race, they can go to your track, Max."

"That's a common mistake, Calavera." Max scolded. "Let 'em call their bookies." Suddenly Max clicked his fingers. "Hell, what am I sayin'? I'll arrange it so they can call the track direct!" He said, and I think I saw dollar signs spin in Max's eye sockets as he started figuring the kickback into his betting revenue. "We've gotta work together to make this a first-class burg, 'cause I tell ya, Manny – those punch boards just don't cut it."

"You're right, Max." I nodded.

"Well, then." Max finished as he put his hat back on. "I guess you've got a good little club here, Manny. Not as nice as my girlfriend's, of course, but…" Max gave a slight shrug.

"Did you say… your girlfriend?" I said in a dim tone.

"Hey, Manny! Don't pretend you don't hear the gossip. It's not a secret anymore: Olivia and I are officially an item." He clapped my shoulder again as I took that in. "Don't forget to invite me to the grand opening."

"I won't, Max." I replied.

Max left the hut after giving my hand another crushing. After taking a few steps, he turned halfway towards me.

"By the way…" He called over his shoulder. "Police Chief Logan is a pal of mine. Be sure to show him a good time if he turns up in your club."

He nodded and walked away.

"Oh, man!" I breathed quietly.

Chapter 17 – Crossed Wires

"The police chief?" Glottis asked when I told him the story. "Why in the underworld does Max care if *he* has a good time?"

"My guess is that it's Max's price for not stomping on me. I make Logan happy, and Max stays happy."

"I dunno, Manny." Glottis said in a cautious tone. "I don't think I like this crowd."

"Don't worry, *mano*." I said. "As long as we make money, I don't care *how* sleazy our company is."

After all, Max had a reputation for treating his associates well.

"But what about Miss Colomar?" Glottis asked pointedly.

"That's what this is all about, buddy."

"Huh?" His ears twitched a couple of times.

"Look, we haven't had any luck finding Meché, yeah? My guess is she's hiding out. We're looking for her, Domino's looking for her – and I don't know about you, but that would make *me* nervous as hell. So I put my name up in lights, make a big splash, and maybe *that'll* draw her out."

"Maybe…" Glottis said doubtfully.

"And as a bonus, any profit the club makes can be funnelled to the LSA."

"That's a pretty good idea." Glottis admitted. "Hey! Did you see this?"

He suddenly stuffed an oversized hand into his trouser pockets, and pulled out a crumpled newspaper.

"I haven't had much time for the papers lately." I said.

"That's too bad, Manny. You're missing some interesting stuff. Take a look at this!" He pointed to an article.

"*¡Hijole!* " I exclaimed as I read it. "I had no idea the LSA was getting so busy!"

For that matter, I didn't even know we were making the papers *at all*.

"That's nothin', Manny." Glottis went on. "A couple of weeks ago, they raided a warehouse, took a lot of chemicals, broke into some DOD offices, and then ransacked 'em good!"

"Yeah?" I hadn't heard any of this from Sal. Not too surprising, considering how far from the main action I was. "Whose offices?"

"Dunno, Manny. Papers didn't say."

"Sure sounds like Sal's on top of things, all right." I said admiringly.

"If you say so, Manny." Glottis said, less so. "But I don't like it. People are gonna get hurt."

"I know, buddy." I agreed. "But, somehow, I don't think Hector's gang will give up without a fight. The right tools for the job, you know?"

Glottis' shoulders sagged. "Yeah, well… I *still* don't like it."

I merely shrugged. "So what can you do about it?"

"Hey, I almost forgot!" Glottis exclaimed. "This came for you while you were away."

He rummaged in his pockets a bit more, and eventually handed me a telegram.

I opened it up.

MANUEL
I AM TROUBLED BY REPORTS OF YOU BUYING THE AUTOMAT AND CONVERTING IT INTO A NIGHTCLUB STOP ITS FINE FOR YOU TO BE COMFORTABLE IN RUBACAVA FOR YOUR LONG STAY BUT I PRAY YOU HAVENT LOST SIGHT OF THE LARGER GOALS STOP IT IS NOT IN THIS WORLD BUT IN THE NEXT IN WHICH OUR TRUE GLORY LIES
SALVADOR LIMONES

"Well, isn't that just ducky…" I growled sarcastically as I grabbed my jacket and threw it on. "Keep an eye on those building supplies, *carnal*… just until Lola gets here."
It was time to get a few things settled.

I went down to the Blue Casket. Olivia had been a little inhospitable when work started on my club, but I think it was all just an act to telegraph the proper attitude to her customers. She reverted to normal once she saw that her customers were not only uninterested, but some were openly hostile. Like Alexi and Slisko.
Gunnar was a somewhat different story. We had started to bump into each other from time-to-time… intentionally by accident. Sometimes around the dockyards, sometimes at the bar of the Blue Casket, wherever – and we talked. When word spread around town that I was going to open a nightclub, Gunnar dropped by the night I closed up the Rub-a-Mat for good. Lola and I had cleaned out the kitchen and all the food slots and loaded it into a truck Brock had rented to haul the stuff down to the demon quarters of Rubacava. I'd heard that some of the Sea Bees – the demon bees that worked at the docks – had been laid off, and I figured they could use some food.
After Brock had taken off and Lola had gone home, I went back inside the Rub-a-Mat to sort of say goodbye to the old place as it was, before I started transforming it. When I was done moping around downstairs I went up to the office and collected the few papers I hadn't yet moved to my hotel room, stuffed them into my briefcase and went down to the front doors. Before I reached them there was a tapping at the glass, which initially I thought may have been another carrier pigeon.
When I saw the shadowy figure outside however, I realized it was Gunnar. Something about his body language made me let him in.

"'Fraid I can't offer you anything, *mano*." I said as I closed the doors behind him. "I just sent what's left of the food down to the out-of-work Sea Bees."
"I don't need to eat anything, Clyde." Gunnar said in a grim tone. He gave me a searching look, followed by a deep breath. "What I need is an explanation. A *casino!?* I was really starting to think you were one of us."
Gunnar shook his head, almost as if he didn't want to hear anything I had to say.

I gave a heavy sigh and walked into the dining area to turn on the lights.

"There are a lot of ways to fight a revolution, and most of them need money." I said as calmly as I could.

Gunnar followed me in and remained standing while I sat down at a table.

"You are truly a disappointment." He growled at me. "You really had me with all that jive about justice… and it was all just smoke and mirrors."

"No, don't say that." I said, almost pleading. "And sit down. Let's talk like the comrades you *know* we are."

He sat down, but his tone remained the same. "I don't know that at all. Give me a reason to believe in you. Like, join us on the docks. Help us to organize the workers!"

"You know I'd like to." I insisted, but Gunnar just gave me a look of bitter disappointment. "I really would, but believe me when I say I've got a bigger job to do. There are people in El Marrow who need the kind of money a casino can pull in. There's another revolution, Gunnar. One fighting corruption and oppression much worse than that of the maritime union."

Gunnar glared at me, a calculating look in his eye sockets.

"Supposing I wanted to believe you…" He said. "Why haven't you said anything about this before?"

"I can't talk openly about my underground gig, man, or I'd put the whole scene in dangerville."

"Maybe so." He allowed. "Maybe not, I don't know. But I *do* know that a man with a cause doesn't keep quiet about it… not around his comrades."

He was twisting the knife, and he knew it. I'm almost certain he wanted to see how I'd react.

"You know something?" I said after a few moments in silence. "You remind me of my friend, Salvador Limones."

Gunnar just stared at me for several long seconds. The eyes he no longer had seemed to grow to twice their size. He took the bait.

"You *know* Salvador Limones?" He breathed quietly.

I had never spoken of Salvador to Gunnar, apart from mentioning his name that one time. But I knew that word of the LSA was starting to get around the radical grapevine.

Gunnar leaned forward, eager for more news. I could tell he was hooked.

"What's he like…?"

"He's not a man you can know from a description." I said simply. "You have to meet him." I took the time to shake my head. "But I'm not sure you or your two friends ever will."

"I don't get you." Gunnar said. He seemed confused, and maybe a little hurt.

"I'm talking about genuine revolutionary instincts, *carnal*. That's what Sal is looking for, not just cats who spout Marx and Lenin chapter-by-verse. The revolution isn't stock answers to a catechism." I stood up slowly and moved towards the doors. "I just don't know if you three will ever get it."

Gunnar knew a dismissal when he heard one. He got up, followed me out, and walked slowly away into the night as I locked up.

From that night on, whenever we crossed paths, Gunnar was even more polite than before. We spoke alone several times after that meeting inside the old Rub-a-Mat. He told me he was trying to get Alexi to see that I wasn't just another class enemy, but he didn't seem to be having a lot of luck.
He was having even less, if that were possible, with Slisko.
So when I walked into the Blue Casket after getting Sal's telegram, Gunnar gave me a friendly nod while Alexi tried to pretend I wasn't there.
Slisko wasn't the quiet type.

"Hey, look who's making the scene!" He exclaimed. "It's Manny Calavera – the up, the down, the backside of the *novaeu riche*!"

"*Hola*, trust-funder." I needled in return and sat down uninvited (the only way I ever sat at their table in those days). I turned my attention to Gunnar. "So, do you think you're ready to meet Salvador Limones?" I chirped, although I was mostly speaking for the others' benefit, and Gunnar seemed to understand because he kept quiet.

"Salvador Limones?" Slisko asked incredulously, as if on cue. "Salvador Limones is a fairytale! A spook-story the Man tells the masses as he puts them to sleep."
Alexi couldn't possibly ignore that. "Idiot!" He bit off. "Salvador Limones is a very real and very great, great man." He turned to glare at me. "And it's a sure thing he'd have nothing whatsoever to do with *you*."

"A sure thing?" I said confidently as I stood up. "You're forgetting that the odds are *always* in the house's favour. I can have Salvador here within a week."
Slisko laughed while Alexi remained glaring at me, and even seemed a shade angry. Gunnar looked hopeful. I turned and walked towards the exit.
Olivia appeared out of nowhere, stopping me before I got there.

"*Who* is Salvador Limones?" She asked.

"Olivia!" I chided. "What kind of revolutionary are you?"

"Who said I was a revolutionary?" She asked with what I took to be mock innocence. "Still, maybe I should study up. It could impress the customers."
I just laughed and started for the door again. "I gotta go. Catch you later, hep chick."

"Keep practicing that lingo, man." She called out after me. "You'll get it."

The truth was, despite the certainty I displayed to Alexi's gang, I wasn't sure whether or not I could get Salvador to Rubacava at all – much less inside a week. If I couldn't, then the LSA would never get any traction there. I had little credit with Alexi and none with Slisko, and while I had practically landed Gunnar, his friends weren't exactly holding onto his coattails. There was no one else I knew in Rubacava who would have been as suitable. Maybe Olivia, but her connections to Maximino bothered me a little and I wasn't sure how to approach her without giving too much away. I contacted Salvador the next morning but I only had to say I needed him to come to Rubacava. He didn't want me saying anything over the phone. He said he'd come if I sent Glottis for him.
So I did.

Chapter 18 – A Little Garden Party

Glottis had been gone a couple of days when something very disturbing happened. Carla and I were at a quiet little restaurant in an upscale part of town on the largest island. The maitre d' told me I had a phone call.
It was Lola, and she was *very* agitated.
"Manny!" She exclaimed when I got on the wire. "You gotta get over here right away!"
"Lola, what's up?"
"Something *terrible* has happened! I've already called the cops. Please, Manny… hurry!"
"The cops?! What's going on?"
"I don't know! I don't know what to call it! Stop asking questions and get over here!"
"Okay, Lola. I'm on my way." I hung up and went back to Carla. "I gotta go." I said to her as calmly as possible. "Something's up. Waiter, check!"
I took a long, heavy drag on my cigarette before stubbing it out.
Carla folded her arms. "Is it about that Mercedes Colomar?" She asked coldly.
"No, Lola was too upset to say what it's about, but it's serious enough for the cops to be involved." I answered.
I glanced at the check and peeled off a few bills.
I rushed for the door, but glanced back to see Carla following me.
"Why don't you finish your dinner?" I asked.
Carla pushed me forward. "You're killing me."

We got to the construction site. It was full of flashing lights and cops in uniform. Fortunately, being at the top of the cliff, the activity hadn't attracted too big a crowd.
"Manny!" Lola cried out when she saw me.
"What's all this about?" I demanded when she had rushed up to me.
She pointed gingerly over to a pile of supplies beyond the contractors hut.
"It's over there…" She shuddered.
"What is?
"Why don't you just go and *look*?" Carla snapped. She took Lola by the shoulders and led her aside. "It'll be alright." She soothed.
I went over to where Lola had indicated, but was stopped by a highly officious-looking cop.
"Are you Calavera?" He asked in a snooty accent.
"Yes, I am. What's going on here?"
"That's what we're trying to find out. Come and look at this."
He led me around to the far side of the pile and pointed.
"*Dios mio!* " I exclaimed as I saw the fully-flourished pile of leaves and Iris flowers lying rigid on the ground. It was a soul that had been sprouted. I felt sick and turned away. "Any idea who he was?" I asked the cop.
He shook his head. "I'm wondering what you might know about this."

"Me?" I exclaimed. "I just got here. Didn't Lola see or hear anything?"
The cop stared at me with a hard gaze, then shrugged. "Most likely he was sprouted elsewhere, and just dumped here. Unfortunately."
A long car pulled up at that moment. A slow-moving, tall but strongly-hunched over man got out. The cop waved him over to our direction.
"Over here, Membrillo." He called out.
"Logan." The man said, by way of greeting. He glanced at me and then back at the police chief. "What have you got?" His voice was a mournful, deep drone.
"Another sprouting." Logan answered. "Just like the others."
Membrillo knelt beside the man-shaped vegetation and started spreading apart the leaves and stems.
"Hmm…" He said. "No clothes. Anything found around here?"
"No." Logan replied. "Nothing yet."
Membrillo turned the sprouted soul partly over and felt around in the foliage.
"There's a nick at the back of the skull." He said remotely, before looking slowly up at Logan. "This was an execution. See if you can find the dart, this time. Maybe it can be traced."
I shuddered at the horrible thought.
"Tell me something I don't already know." Logan said angrily. I saw that he was trying to make himself calm down. "Okay, let's get him into the wagon. I want an ID as soon as possible."
Membrillo took a notebook out of his pocket and began writing semi-feverishly.
Logan directed a couple of other cops to get a body bag out of Membrillo's car. They waited until Membrillo had stopped writing. He slowly tore off a sheet and handed it to Logan. Within minutes, the sprouted soul was in the bag and being carried to the car.
"I'll finish the preliminaries tonight." Membrillo said to Logan. "Send me in the morning whoever you think I should see."
With that, he climbed back into his car and drove off.
"Okay, Calavera." Logan said as he turned back to me. "I want you to go down to the morgue tomorrow morning. Maybe you can identify the victim."
"You want Lola, too?" I asked.
"Yes. And that girl you arrived with. I'm going to leave one of my men here overnight. You go home." He snuffed. "Sergeant! Let's clear these people off!"
He moved away to direct his men in driving away the small group of spectators.
I collected Lola and Carla. "C'mon. Let's get out of here."
Lola hesitated. "What about –"
"Logan's leaving someone on guard. Let's go somewhere and take our minds off things for a while."

Later that night, after parting company with Carla and Lola (we had spent the remainder of our time at a quiet little all-night café), I went back to my hotel and was letting myself into my room – when a shadow detached itself from near the fire exit down the hall.

"Sorry I startled you." Gunnar said, after I climbed back down from the ceiling and steadied my imaginary heart. "Got a minute?"

"Sure, *mano*." I replied shakily. "Come in." I pushed the door open and Gunnar followed me inside.

Gunnar was shaking his head warily as he entered, jerking his thumb back toward the door and walking over to the curtained windows. I shut the door just in time to see him carefully opening a tiny gap in the curtains to peer down at the street.

"You're very 'secret agent' tonight." I said with a laugh.

Gunnar turned to me and spoke quietly. "I heard about what happened."

"Yeah? What have you heard?" I asked him as I sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off my shoes. The tie came off next and was tossed somewhere on the sheets behind me.

Gunnar moved over to the door and leaned back against it, folding his arms.

"Some 'Sproutella' sprouting powder was left at the construction site. That's the chemical they pack sprouting darts with. Maybe it doesn't mean anything, but there are rumours."

I sighed. "I've had a long day, so…"

He held up a bony hand, his eye sockets focused directly on me.

"Sometimes, cats from El Marrow make the scene. They say things about a rogue DOD agent making trouble in Rubacava." He said.

This was getting interesting.

"The stories aren't very specific…" Gunnar went on with a shrug. "Other than to say that the Man isn't very happy. Could be he's unhappy enough to send the troublemaker a message."

"Or maybe…" I said thoughtfully. "Bad things just happen and the crap has to land somewhere."

Gunnar nodded slowly, but he didn't seem to agree. "You can't escape gravity." He turned his hand to the door. "Like you said, it's been a long day and it's time for me to scat."

"Thanks for dropping by." I said, as Gunnar left and shut the door behind him.

It wasn't until he was gone that I realized his gravity remark definitely wasn't meant as an agreement at all.

The next morning I went to the morgue with Lola. Carla had already gone down by herself. Lola was still pretty upset, and wasn't looking forward to having to take a closer look at the sprouted body.
Neither was I, truth be told. Seeing it in near darkness was enough for me, and Membrillo's digging around in the foliage had given me nightmares.

When we got to the police headquarters we met Maximino coming out of the corridor we were directed to follow.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in surprise.

"Same thing as you are, Calavera." He growled. "Takin' a look at that corsage they found on your property."

"Yeah? Anyone you know?"
Max shook his head. "No. And I didn't recognize the last five, either."

"*Five* more sproutings!?" I exclaimed.

"Yeah. All in the last three months, to boot. I'm tellin' ya, Calavera… if this keeps up, business ain't gonna be so hot. People will stay away from here if they get it in their heads that they'll be sprouted – I'll tell ya that twice."

"This isn't good." I said, albeit being perversely relieved. All those sproutings punched a giant hole in Gunnar's theory that someone was sending me a message. Then I noticed Max staring straight at Lola.

"Oops, manners." I blurted out. "Max, this is my friend Lola. She's the one that found the body."

"Pleased ta meet ya, Lola." Max said suavely. He took her hand and gently kissed it. "Not the kind of thing a nice girl like you should hafta see."

"Even worse for the guy that got shot." Lola said weakly.

"She's got heart." Max said to me, loudly enough so Lola could hear.
He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a little laminated card. Max handed it to Lola. "Here ya go. A temporary pass to the High Rollers' Lounge at the cat track. Come see the kitties, knock back a few, forget about your troubles for a while. Okay?"

"Sure, Max…" Lola said gingerly, taking the card.

"Hey, Max." I cut in. "Just why is Logan dragging *you* down here to see these sproutings? I can't imagine you being connected to something like this."

"You're smart, Calavera. I already told ya that, right? Logan, he's not that smart. He sees a hit, he thinks of me – the rat." Max put his hand over his sternum. "Me, I'm a legitimate businessman. I don't have time for the rough stuff, and I make sure my boys don't either."

"Then maybe some new outfit is moving into town." I suggested, suddenly thinking of Hector and Domino.
Max gave me a surprised look.

"You might have something there. I hadn't thought of that. It's a sure thing Logan won't have, either." I sensed his grim frown. "I'll hafta look into this. If someone *is* muscling in on my territory, I'll give 'em what for!"
He started to walk away. Lola elbowed me gently in the ribs. I ignored the gesture and steered us both down the corridor leading to the morgue.

"C'mon. Let's get this over with."

"He doesn't seem all that bad." Lola said.
"Max?" I shrugged. "I guess not. But you heard what he said: he's a 'legitimate businessman', and you know what that means."
Lola gave me her own shrug. "We're all stuck in the Land of the Dead. You know what *that* means."
"Not a bad point, actually." I replied as we came to the morgue. "You ready?"
"Are you?" She countered.
I didn't answer. We opened the door and went in.

Membrillo was waiting for us.
"I'll make this quick…" He droned. "Look at the face and tell me if you recognize it."
Membrillo had cleared the vegetation away from the skull. It was covered by a green stubble, but the face was clear enough.
"I've never seen him before…" Lola said shakily. "Manny…"
She turned and ran out. I took a step toward the door.
"She'll be alright." Membrillo said indifferently. "Eventually. But, first things first."
I sighed and forced myself to look closely at the sprouted soul's face.
"No." I said eventually. "Never saw him before."
"No one ever does." Membrillo replied. "But thank you for your time."
He turned back to the body and began feeling amongst the leaves and flowers.
I was extremely glad I no longer had a gag reflex.
"What exactly are you looking for?" I asked him.
He glanced back at me, ever-so briefly.
"I'm digging for a treasure that part of me does not wish to find. For when I uncover that sad doubloon that tells me who this poor soul is, my reward is not riches, but the chance to make a phone call… and break someone's heart."
"Doesn't anyone ever come to claim them?" I asked. Membrillo merely shook his head. "What a sad story…" I added.
"Death makes sad stories of us all."
I wondered if he was always this cheerful.
"How do you do this job?" I asked, feeling the need to learn more.
"Without becoming jaded, you mean? My secret to happiness is that I have the heart of a twelve-year-old boy." He said slowly. Then, to my surprise, he pointed toward a nearby shelf. "I keep it over here, in a jar. Would you like to see it?"
"*No!*" I insisted, sick to my ribcage.
"Sorry." He said, sounding more amused than sorry. "Old coroner joke."
"Well…" I said, feeling rather relived and turning to go. "Don't let me bother you."
"Always nice to have visitors." Membrillo said quietly as I left.

I found Lola out in the lobby. She was sitting hunched over with her face in her hands. I patted her on the shoulders.

"You okay?"

She looked up at me. "I feel sick, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"You and me both. Let's get out of here."

When we got back outside, Lola tugged my sleeve.

"I don't know if I can go back, Manny."

"Hey, it's not like you to be a quitter." I chided.

"I'm not." She looked away from me. "It's just… I mean, I…" She trailed off. "Maybe we're in danger…" She finally got it out.

"We're not." I insisted. "That body was just dumped there. It's got nothing to do with us."

"But what if more show up?"

I shook my head. "That won't happen. Having a pattern would be the surest way of getting caught. Whoever did this thought our mess would make a good hiding place, that's all. Next time – which there hopefully won't be – they'll find a new spot. We're free and clear now, I promise."

"Well, okay Manny. If you say so." Lola took my arm and we started walking back. I noticed she was staring curiously at the card Max had given her. "Maybe I'll go to the track tonight."

"Sure." I said. "You could use a little distraction."

Chapter 19 – Impressing the Commies

Things were a little strained that day at the construction site. The workers were badly rattled when they learned there had been a sprouting, but the foreman got them going after a while. The next day they were back up to speed.

In the afternoon of that second day, the *Bone Wagon* came roaring into the parking lot. Salvador climbed down from the back and Glottis pealed away to the docks. I was relieved to see Salvador in a grey suit and not his usual fatigues. I walked over to where he stood, looking things over.

"Welcome to Rubacava, Sal." I said.

"Thank you, Manuel." He replied, clasping my hand.

I gestured over to the far edge of the lot and we started walking there.

"We've got to get together on a couple of things." I began. "But first, how's Eva?"

"She is well, and sends her love."

That was good to know.

I sat down on the curb and, after a brief hesitation, Salvador dropped down beside me.

"I hear you've been busy in El Marrow." I said.

"Yes." Salvador said as he got out two cigarettes, passing one to me. "The movement now has true momentum." He went on as I gave him a light. "Our numbers are rapidly growing, and much of this is due to our communications and intelligence systems – both of which we owe to you."

"Money's a problem though, isn't it?"

Salvador shrugged. "We are not seeking profit, my friend, but I will admit we are having trouble financing our operations. This is something I anticipated, but wasn't expecting to encounter until much later."

"I'll bet it's especially tough when you're up against guys who can break into the DOD's piggy bank."

"This is true. Our agents are committed to their work, but we must often deal with those who do not share our convictions; we must equip ourselves for the struggle." Salvador took a lengthy puff on his cigarette. "Forgive me Manuel, but I must ask you where you are going with this?"

"Do you know what kind of revenue a successful casino can bring in?" I asked simply. Salvador shook his head. "It can be a lot, and the people in this town are begging for brand new places where they can throw away their money. See what I'm getting at?"

"I believe I do. But this may be a dangerous game, assuming you can become profitable. What about your debt?" Salvador said, gesturing over at the construction work.

I shrugged it off. "It's pretty light, actually. The guy I bought this place from left for the Land of Eternal Rest. He did alright with the place that used to be here. We got along well, and he gave me everything over-and-above what he needed to get him to the end of the line. Glottis has chipped in some of his own savings, too. There's quite a nightlife in Rubacava, and it shouldn't take too long to start turning a profit."

"Perhaps." Salvador said thoughtfully. "I won't deny that this might greatly ease our financial problems, but channelling funds to us may be dangerous."

"I agree, and that brings us to the second issue – the one I need your help with." I took a final drag on my cigarette and flicked it away. "Sal, I'm stymied. I don't have a computer, and there aren't any disaffected DOD employees to work with here. Most of the people in this town are trying to get on a boat, or they're just out for the ride, or something. Getting involved with *any* cause is the last thing on their minds."

Salvador nodded knowingly. "We face such difficulties in El Marrow as well, but I do recognize your lack of adequate intelligence on our part. This is why I have not been pressuring you, despite our urgent need to acquire other agents in Rubacava."

"Well, there are some guys that might work out –"

"Excellent!"

"…except most of them won't give me the time of day. They're a bunch of old-fashioned commie beatniks." I noticed that Salvador seemed amused at that. "Pretty hardcore, but they're the only people I've met here who want to change things."

"And you think they would be suitable for the LSA?"

"They're all primed for revolution. And no one takes them seriously, so it's a great cover. They could work for us, and nobody would pay them any attention. Trouble is, I've only managed to convince one of them that I'm not a tool, and he's not the leader of the bunch. The club doesn't help much." I gestured over to the ongoing construction.

"I would imagine not." Sal replied.

"But the leader of the group – Alexi – has heard of you. You're more than okay with him. I'm thinking that if you meet him, and I'm with you, some of that nobility of yours will rub off and I can finally get somewhere."

"Perhaps, Manuel. But this meeting must be properly staged, and there is no reason to expect him to believe I am who I say I am."

"Well, you can be pretty persuasive." I said with a nod. "I'm not worried about that. But how to arrange this meeting… that could be tricky. I doubt he'd accept an invitation from me."

"Leave matters in my hand, my friend."

We waited until that night. I told Salvador where he could find Alexi and his gang. While I waited in the contractor's hut at the construction site, Salvador went down to the Blue Casket after changing back into his fatigues.
He found Alexi with his friends and told them to follow. When Alexi asked why, Salvador answered mysteriously, "For the revolution… and for justice." Alexi and Gunnar followed. Slisko elected to stay behind. Alexi hesitated when he saw where they were going. Salvador had to get him moving again. I was standing behind the door of the hut when they entered.

"LSA headquarters in Rubacava?" Alexi was asking skeptically. "Calavera may be a tool, but I seriously doubt you could operate under his nose."

"Do you think this is a game?" Salvador asked sharply. "We are not playing at revolution, my friend. There is no prize for the most radical act."

"What are you getting at?"

"Just this: we are *not* operating under Manuel's nose." Salvador said as he took as seat behind the small table that doubled as a makeshift desk and glared up at Alexi.

"I've been trying to tell you –" Gunnar tried to interject.
Alexi spoke over him to Salvador. "I suppose that fat cat is charging you rent, right?"
Salvador shook his head. "If that is what you think, then you really are very stupid."
Alexi stiffened up and Gunnar laughed.
Salvador looked over to where I stood in the shadows. "I don't know what you see in this foolish man."

"Sometimes…" I began, as Alexi jumped and spun around. "I don't know either."

"*Calavera*!?" Alexi exclaimed as I stepped forward. I was wearing the clothes I had worn during the trip to Rubacava. The little circle of light cast by the lamp on the desk gave off an appropriate aura to the situation that was suddenly forming.

Alexi looked back and forth between Salvador and myself, each of us wearing identical outfits (even with mine being a little more stained, despite the best laundering Rubacava had to offer).

"What the *hell* is going on here!?" Alexi growled.

"You've been drafted, solider." Salvador said. "You and your two friends."

"Not me." Gunnar insisted. "Since you're here, Manny must be everything he said he was. I'm a volunteer."

Alexi looked at Gunnar as if he had suddenly grown skin. "What is this all about?" He asked warily.

"It's about justice!" Salvador snapped. "What else?" He stood up and moved around the desk to stand against the door. "I believe we can consider this *your* headquarters, Manuel." He finished.

I edged past Gunnar and sat down behind the table.

"Are you ready to be reasonable now?" I huffed at Alexi.

"Define 'reasonable'." He demanded in a snide tone.

"Are you with the cause or not?"

"*What* cause?" He sneered, turning towards Salvador. "I know exactly who you are. I know what you stand for. But he…" Alexi thrust a skeletal finger in my direction. "*He* is a class enemy. He –"

This time Gunnar did the interrupting. "Oh, get with it, man!" He snapped suddenly. "I've spoken to the cat. I know where he's coming from."

Alexi waved his hand at Gunnar, as if brushing away a fly. "I want it from Limones." He said. "I want *him* to tell me where Calavera is coming from."

Salvador shook his head.

"No. Manuel will tell you himself. He is in charge here in Rubacava, and I am only a guest; and you will do very well not to presume to know what I stand for in the here and now." Sal replied sternly.

"Alright, then." Alexi said, turning back to me. "So tell me: *are* you LSA cats for the revolution, or not?"

"Which revolution?" I countered in the same tone Alexi had used on me earlier. "The one demanded by Marx's historical dialectic?"

"Of course!" Alexi exclaimed impatiently.

"Okay, but his dialectic is that of a materialist, right?" I spread my hands out. "Yet here we are – DEAD. Despite appearances, none of that matters here. Where does the Land of the Dead fit into that dialectic?"

Alexi didn't say anything.

"It doesn't." Gunnar said. "What we need is a *spiritualist* dialectic, but I don't think that's what you're talking about, are you man?"

It took me a few seconds, but I realized that Gunnar was trying to advance the argument, not trip me up.

"No, I'm not." I finally agreed. "You want to organize the dock workers against the union? Great. I'm with you all the way. Do you want to know why? Because the union is crooked and the workers are getting a raw deal, and I want justice for them, same as for anyone and everyone else. But this is the Land of the Dead, comrade. Marx was dealing with the Land of the Living. His dialectic's out – it doesn't apply here, except maybe as an abstraction. Without Gunnar's spiritualist dialectic, we're just left with justice. And that applies even here."

"I'm not sure I follow you… what do you mean by all that? Justice for whom, and how? Marx gives us the tools for answering those questions. If those tools don't work in the Land of the Dead – and I'm not convinced of that – then just what *are* we working with here?"

"If you want an all-embracing ideology, I can't give you one." I admitted. I didn't honestly think I wanted one. All this beatnik banter had my head spinning as it was. Besides, having all the answers – or at least thinking you had – was just trouble. "But I *can* spell out the situation we've got here." I paused for a moment. Not even Gunnar was going to like what I was about to say. "Do you know what Sal and I were doing before the LSA was formed?"

"Making time like everyone else?" Alexi shrugged.

"Hardly." I said bluntly. "We were reapers."

"Salvador Limones!?" Gunnar exclaimed in disbelief.

Almost at the same time, Alexi angrily interjected. "You expect me to believe that Salvador Limones was a tool of the Man?"

I gave a false laugh. "You really have no clue how this world works, do you? Oh, well. Let's try this: can you agree that some people lived their lives better than others?"

"By whose rules?" Alexi demanded defiantly.

"By the 'Powers that Be'." I half-snapped, feeling a little anger building up inside me. "By whomever or whatever pulls the strings. A power that we can't see, hear or touch." And a power that doesn't seem to give a damn about what's happening within the DOD, I thought bitterly. "So tell me something. The Land of the Dead is pretty dangerous, right? Well, suppose you could make the journey across it easier for some. So who then gets safe passage? The fat cat who can pay for it, or the person who deserves it?"

"Leaving aside the questions for *whose* rules – and I'd like to hear some day about why you're so uptight about that question – it'd be fairer to make everyone equal." Alexi answered.

"He's talking about justice, brother – not fairness." Gunnar said. "Make a choice."

Alexi glared at Gunnar, but was silent for a few moments.

"Then it goes to the one who deserves it." He finally said. "But how do you determine who that is, man?" He additionally demanded, unwilling to give any ground.

"Well, people have been dying for a long time." I pointed out. "The DOD's got a lot of experience and they train their agents pretty well. Just about everyone I ever met did their best to see that people got exactly what they deserved. And if what they deserved wasn't all that good, we didn't bend the rules just because the client was loaded. Unfortunately, there's an outfit with other ideas entirely."

"What outfit is this?" Gunnar asked. "That's something you haven't explained to me yet, either. Now that we're all up to speed, what are we rebelling against?"

I resisted the urge to say 'What have you got?', and instead turned to Sal. We agreed beforehand that this part of making the 'sale' was his.

"The Department of Death is no longer serving the people as it has in the past." Salvador said. "No longer are good deeds rewarded and the innocent gently conveyed to the next world. The greedy and corrupt are stealing the destinies of the sainted dead and are thereby making a mockery of proper justice. The corruption is spreading, reaching out to poison all of the Land of the Dead. If it is not dealt with quickly and decisively, then nothing – not even something as small as a band of dock workers organizing against a corrupt union – will escape undefiled."

"Right." I said, deciding to bring Salvador's soaring rhetoric back down to earth. "They've been stealing Double-N tickets and selling them to the undeserving rich. That leaves the people who've earned their tickets all on their own, walking across the Land of the Dead without hope. And that's the only part we've discovered so far." An image of Meché leapt into my head, but quickly passed. "You see, our struggle here isn't a materialist one; it's spiritual, like Gunnar said. But it boils down to much the same thing: do we take people as they are, and treat them according to their deeds and their needs, or do we bow to the fat cats and walk over everyone else? So I'll ask you again *mano*, are you with the cause or not?"

I felt that was enough to drive the point home.

"You're asking more than that, Calavera." Alexi insisted. "You're asking me to put aside everything I've learned from Marx's painstaking, scientific work and embrace vague ideals. I don't know if I can do that – not even for Salvador Limones."

"Am I really asking you to give up anything? Remember, I'm all for you congregating among the dock workers. It needs to be done, and you're the one to do it." I said, although Salvador shifted a little. Something like the ghost of a frown flickered over his face. "I think it's more a matter of asking you to expand your horizons. Think about it, who has *ever* tried to form a dialect for the Land of the Dead? I can tell you for a fact that Marx himself hopped into a coach and rode out of here as quick as he could."

When your manager is someone like Yehuda, you hear a lot from agents in other divisions about the famous dead.

"Is that a fact?" Alexi asked, genuinely interested. "Well, I guess you're starting to make a little sense." He paused for momentary thought. "Maybe Marx isn't a *completely* perfect fit for the Land of the Dead. Maybe that's why we're not having a lot of success with the dock workers. Marx didn't concern himself with demons any more than he did the dead. Perhaps I can adapt the dialect for this world."

"Sure." I replied, eager with the progress that had been made. "So, are you on board?"

There was a lengthy pause during which I feared Alexi might continue to object.

"Yes." He replied at last. "There are many different forms of oppression in this world. If I do not fight them all, then I am no revolutionary." He then shot me a sideways look. "And to think I gained this insight from *you*."

I shrugged. "That'll teach you to judge by appearances, I guess."

"So what now?" Gunnar asked.

"Well, perhaps the most important thing for you guys to do is to keep on doing what you're already doing." I said. "I don't want anyone outside the organization to see any difference in how you act or what your priorities seem to be."

"And keep riding you in public, I suppose." Alexi said.

"Should be easy." I replied firmly. "Especially for Slisko."

"Probably too easy." Salvador remarked. "Going by first impressions, that one has difficulty controlling his mouth."

"Don't worry about that." Alexi said to Salvador. "Where the revolution is concerned, no daylight shows between his jaws."

"Provided he can be convinced to join up." Gunnar piped in. "He wouldn't even get up from the table."

Alexi waved his hand at Gunnar again. "His favourite chick's reciting tonight."

"The one who can't hold her liquor?" Gunnar asked with a chuckle.

"Okay." I said, cutting off that subject. "Slisko is another draftee. As for what we do next, getting ourselves organized is the main thing; then we deal with things as they happen. The most important thing for now is to keep our ear holes to the ground." I turned to address Gunnar. "Maybe you were on to something when you told me about rumours of the DOD being unhappy with a rogue agent, and maybe not. Point is, we've all got to pay attention to things like that in case there is ever something to them. You've got contacts among the workers, and I'm making some contacts among the movers and shakers. There's bound to be something useful in all that chatter if we just pay attention. Another thing – and this is potentially dangerous – when the club starts turning a profit, we've got to get the money to El Marrow. That's where all the main action is, and sad to say, we can't fight a revolution without cash… and lots of it."

"Why not just send your demon friend, Glottis?" Alexi asked, probably not relishing the idea of being a mere courier.

I shook my head. "That's out."

"You send him out on plenty of errands." He protested. "Why not this?"

"Simple – I send him out on plenty of errands. You know it, and everyone else in town knows it. I'd be the easiest person imaginable to suspect." Alexi could only nod to that. "Besides which, this particular errand needs to be done quietly. Glottis and the *Bone Wagon* aren't quiet at all, and they're too well known to… to someone who has good reason to pay close attention to when the *Bone Wagon* is in town."

"Makes sense." Gunnar said. "Besides, it's not as if Alexi, Slisko and I are always in the same place at the same time. Harder for the Man to tell when one of us isn't around than a giant orange demon who lays an inch of rubber just parallel parking."

"I guess so." Alexi half-agreed.

"One last thing." I went on. "Look out for the names Mercedes Colomar and Hector LeMans."

"Colomar's that chick you've been looking for ever since you blew into town, isn't she?" Alexi asked. I was a little discomforted by how easily that little piece of information was snaking its way around. "What does she have to do with the revolution?"

"She's the most tangible link we have to the gang we're fighting – the only victim we know by name. Finding her would go a long way to blowing their cover. And Hector LeMans is behind it all. We don't know anything more about him than that, do we Sal?" I asked, in case there was something he hadn't told me yet."

"Regrettably, no." Salvador answered. "So any rumours or gossip about Hector LeMans could be extremely valuable. And Manuel is quite correct about the importance of Mercedes Colomar." He added.

No one spoke for a while. I couldn't help but feel as if some grand zenith had just been reached.

"Well," I finally said. "I guess that's it for now. I think you two should break the news to Slisko."

"I'll hold him down." Gunnar jibed back.

Salvador took a step away from the door. "Gentlemen." He solemnly shook Alexi's hand, then Gunnar's. "You have joined a noble cause. With unwavering diligence, we cannot but prevail in our just struggle. *Viva la Revolución* !"

Alexi and Gunnar echoed Salvador and left. Sal's face gave off a soft sigh I wasn't sure I actually heard as I leaned heavily back into my chair. I rubbed my face with both hands.

"I wasn't sure we'd pull that off." I admitted. I lit a cigarette to settle my nerves.

"Nor I, my friend." Salvador admitted. He paced a few steps in the cramped shack. "Were it not for Gunnar's assistance…" He trailed off. "Nor am I sure of Alexi's worth."

That actually surprised me. If he did have reservations about any of the three, I thought it would have been Slisko.

"Why Alexi?" I asked.

"You appealed to his vanity." He answered grimly. "Consider his statement that he could adapt the Marxist dialect to the Land of the Dead. Alexi is the man to do it."

I could see Salvador's point. "I guess he *would* like to be this world's Lenin." I admitted. Although I myself would have worried more about the Stalin who might be waiting in the wings.

"Yes, and that dream could be a problem if it becomes too real for him. He will have to be watched." Sal concluded. "In the meantime, I have your new cell's first assignment. Now that we are fully operational here in Rubacava, we must work towards Puerto Zapato. Your men must consider another recruit, one who can become our agent in that distant port."

"That's pretty far from the action, Sal. What's Zapato got to do with the ticket scam?"

Salvador stopped pacing and glared at me with an unhappy expression.

"Although our enemies are based in El Marrow, I am becoming more convinced that their operations extend far beyond the city limits. Consider that the sole victim of the LeMans gang that we can identify is Mercedes Colomar. All the rest – and there must be hundreds of them – remain anonymous. What becomes of them? Where do they go?"

I shrugged. "I suppose, like Meché, they're left to cross the Land of the Dead on foot. That's what you said when we first met and it still makes sense to me."

"But can we be so sure, my friend?" Salvador asked. His furtive pacing resumed. "Only your Meché is positively known to have set out on foot, and she has not been heard from since. As for all the others, if they are also on foot, why is there no rumour of them? Surely, if genuine saints were walking without hope across the Land of the Dead, such a thing would become known."

I blew a few smoke rings while I considered what Sal had said, and left unsaid. It was true; there was no news of Meché, either. Finally, I looked up and replied. "But that's assuming that these saints are known to be saints. They're usually pretty humble and unassuming, you know."

"This is true." Salvador admitted. "But even so, it seems incredible that *hundreds* of saints could have been robbed of their destinies and left to their own resources without some whisper of it being spread abroad."

"I guess I'm not sure what your point is, Sal."

"It is just this, Manuel: I am coming to the belief that the victims are being put out of the way by the LeMans organization. The silence surrounding their fate is far too complete."

"Do you think they're being sprouted?" I asked, chilled by the implications.

"I do not know. I am inclined to think not, as disposing of the remains would be difficult and their eventual discovery would alert the authorities that something was amiss."

"And yet, there *are* sproutings going on, far more than there have been."

"This also is true, but in many cases they are fallen LSA agents. Others are established residents of the Land of the Dead, not new arrivals. I have been making careful inquiries and I know of no instances of the newly-deceased having been sprouted." Salvador sighed. "No, Manuel. Something else must be happening to the souls we are concerned with. Therefore, we must have agents spread out across the Land of the Dead – for I believe that our enemies have already done so."

"And Puerto Zapato is the biggest city after Rubacava. I get you now."

"Excellent." Salvador said proudly. "Your unit must recruit another who will then be sent to Zapato. First, however, the new recruit must be sent to El Marrow for training. Alexi should accompany him. Afterwards, Gunnar and Slisko." He paused to look at his watch. "I must go now. I have already made arrangements with Glottis to take me back to El Marrow immediately. He is waiting for me where your car is kept." Sal extended his hand to me. "You have done well. Farewell, my friend."

"Thanks, Sal." I stubbed out my cigarette and stood, clasping his hand in mine. "Do you need me to show you the way?"

"There is no need. Glottis himself showed me the way earlier today while you were occupied with other matters."

"Don't want to be seen with me, huh?" I joked.

Sal took it seriously. "As you have brought the subject up, yes. I think it best that we are not seen in each other's company more than we already have been. Even Eva and I are seldom seen together in public."

"Security." I replied.

"Regrettably true. *Viva la Revolución* !"

He quickly slipped out the door, and was gone.

I used Glottis as a go-between in my dealings with Alexi until the club was completed, taking to heart Salvador's concerns about appearing in public with other LSA agents (but once the club had been finished, Alexi was again delivering supplies for the restaurant so that he had a natural reason to be there).

After making the choice of an agent for Puerto Zapato, Alexi and the new guy were off to El Marrow for the formal LSA training – something I had never done. Soon after they returned, it was time for Gunnar and Slisko to travel to El Marrow. I passed on to Alexi through Glottis enough money to get the new recruit to Puerto Zapato. After that, the Rubacava branch of the LSA settled into a quiet routine.

Alexi and his gang continued to agitate on the docks while keeping their ear holes open for me. Occasionally they passed along interesting bits of news and gossip… but mostly gossip. Anything that seemed worth passing on went to Salvador. I kept in touch with Membrillo the coroner out of 'concern' over the sproutings that had been going on. I also got plugged into some of the police chatter. A few more sprouted souls were being found every now and then around town and Maximino was getting madder by the day. Lola was spending a lot of her off-time at the track, and Max told me himself that he was sure some outside gang was responsible for the bodies, but he wouldn't go into details. After a few weeks the sprouting slowed, returning to the once-in-a-blue-moon rate they had been since before I arrived in Rubacava. Max seemed proud of that, as if he'd had a hand in the change.

As the work on the club neared completion, we started hearing stories of the Petrified Forest being 'haunted'. Pretty strange really, considering we were all dead. But travellers sometimes told tales of hearing odd sounds or seeing movement that didn't seem like any known forest demon. Some of the stories were pretty wild and I didn't think there was anything to them. I didn't see any point in passing on ghost stories to Salvador.

Chapter 20 – Calavera Café

I became increasingly concerned about putting the final touches on the club. The construction junk was finally cleared off the property and we were down to the interior-decorating stage. We were just about ready for the grand opening when there was another little surprise, but a pleasant one this time. Lola and I were in the casino having the hundredth argument about whether the craps table should be near the door or in a far corner when I heard something unexpected from the dining area.

"Lola…" I asked, a little puzzled. "Is that a piano I hear?"

"Yeah." She replied indifferently. "What were you expecting?"

I hadn't been expecting anything. "Did someone turn the canned music on for some reason?"

"It's Tuesday." Lola cocked her head.

"So?" I shrugged back.

"So, Tuesday was the day the piano was supposed to be delivered."

Now I was really confused. "Delivered? Who ordered a piano? I didn't, did you?"

"It was Glottis' idea. Didn't you know? He thought the restaurant needed live entertainment."

"No, I didn't know." I was getting a little steamed. "Why didn't anyone say something about this to me before?"

"Sorry, Manny." Lola said quietly. "I was sure you knew. But Glottis *is* half-owner."

"Yeah, he is." I sighed. She got me there. "I just don't like the idea of hiring a piano player, too. We've got enough staff as it is."

Lola laughed at me. "*Hire* a piano player? You've got one already!"

It hit me like a brick. "You mean that's *Glottis* playing!?"

"Yeah, he must be giving it a spin."

I shook my head and walked out into the dining area. There, in the middle of the room, was a gorgeous-looking ivory-coloured upright piano. Glottis was polishing it with a rag. I walked over and leaned against the piano.

"Nice set of keys you've got here." I said.

"Yeah!" Glottis beamed. "Sounds sweet, too."

"Too bad you forgot to say anything to *me* about it."

Glottis stopped his polishing. "Huh?"

"It seems the left hand," I pointed to Glottis, "didn't let the right hand," I pointed to myself, "know what it was doing."

A sheepish, contrite expression seeped over Glottis' face. "Gee, I'm sorry Manny. I guess I kinda forgot."

"Kinda…" I shook my head. "What did this set us back?"

"I got it for a real song!" Glottis said, no pun intended. "The lady who owned it is moving on, and I promised to give it a good home."

"Give us a sample." I said, relaxing a little.

"Sure, Manny!" Glottis crowed. He sat down on the bench and played something that sounded like Mozart. Whatever it was, it sounded pretty good.

When he was done, Glottis looked at me.
"Well? What do you think?" He grinned.
"I thought you were created just to drive."
"Well, you know, over the years even a demon dabbles here and there."
"I can see that." I said. "But you forgot something."
Worry creased Glottis' face. "What's that, Manny?"
I went over to the bar and got out a brandy snifter. I placed it on top of the piano and smiled. "The customers need a place to drop their requests."
"Oh, didn't think about that."
I patted him on the arm. "Yeah, but you got most of it right. Good thinking, *carnal*."
"Thanks, boss!" Glottis beamed.
"And you were worried about hiring a piano player." Lola chided as we went back into the casino to settle our argument.
I shrugged. "So what was I to think? I've got a lot of bills to worry about."
"Yeah, but you just assumed that Glottis had fouled up."
"Well, sometimes Glottis just doesn't think."
Lola shook her head sharply. "He can be a little… enthusiastic, but you've got this idea in your head that he's dumb. You see everything he does through that perspective. Sometimes you get so wrapped up in what you think about things that you don't really see them for what they are."
I thought Lola was getting pretty worked up.
"You finished?" I said.
She gave a quick nod.
"Okay. So what am I not seeing about the craps table?"
"Roulette's classier."
I laughed. "Okay, then. You win."

Finally, after weeks of feverish work, we were done. Everything was in place, the joint was stocked, the ads were in the papers, and the invitations to the grand opening had been sent out.
On the evening we opened, a squadron of butterflies were holding an air show underneath my ribcage. It was down to just a few minutes before the doors opened and I was still in my office trying to squeeze into my new tux. I just couldn't get the tie knotted right. Eventually, I gave up and went downstairs.
"Where's Lola?" I asked Lupé, the hat-check girl.
"I think she's in the kitchen." She answered. "What's up, boss?"
"I can't get this stupid tie done."
"I'll take care of it!" Lupé chirped, vaulting over the counter instead of going through the door. She pounced on my tie and started wrestling it into submission.
"Careful!" I said desperately. "It's not a noose."
"Sheesh!" Lupé exclaimed. "Men are just little boys in long pants. There!"
I stuck a couple of fingers into my collar, just to see if I could. "How's it look?"
"Perfect! You're gonna wow 'em, Manny."
"Well, I just hope there's plenty of 'them' to wow."

"Are you kidding? You'll have to beat 'em off with a stick!"

"That could only help business." I said dryly. "You'd better get into your position. We'll be opening soon and I wouldn't want the crowd to trample you."

Lupé laughed loudly and jumped back into her room.

"One of these days I'll have to arrange an introduction between you and that door." I called out to her before turning to enter the restaurant. Lola was coming out of the kitchen. "Everything okay?" I asked.

She saluted merrily. "Everything's ship-shape, captain."

"Great." I replied. "And all this time I thought I was building a nightclub." I took a deep, pointless breath. "I guess this is it."

"It sure is." She said. Something in her voice seemed amiss.

"Everything *is* okay, right?" I asked one more time.

"Uh-huh." She said simply. I dropped the subject. If she had something to say, she'd say it when she was ready.

"Did we ever get an RSVP from Toto?" I asked to change the topic.

Lola gave a small laugh. "He didn't know what 'RSVP' meant. But he said he won't be coming. He said he would feel out of place."

I shrugged. "I kinda figured that, but we had to try. What about Olivia?"

"Yeah, she RSVP'd. At least, I'm guessing that envelope full of ashes was from her."

It was my turn to laugh. "It was definitely from her, then. Well, I'll make sure everyone knows what her answer was. That should make her customers feel good."

Glottis came in from the casino and sat down at his piano. He ran through a couple of quick scales to warm up.

"Are we all in position?" I looked swiftly around. "Okay, let's get this started."

Glottis started playing a jazzy little number while I went to open the doors. I took a step back when I saw the massive crowd standing outside, with Maximino in front. There was a well-rehearsed cheer from Max's 'boys' and the crowd surged inside.

"Hey, Manny!" Max exclaimed as he once again ground the bones in my hand together. "I brought a few friends along. Should put you over big, huh?"

"Couldn't hurt, Max." I said. I casually turned to greet a few of my other invited guests as they came in.

Max gave me a nudge. "I got a couple of presents for ya."

"You didn't have to do that, Max." I said.

He spread his hands. "I'm a big-hearted kinda guy."

Max snapped his fingers and one of his entourage handed him a paper package. Max tore it open and pulled out a magnum bottle of champagne.

"Here ya go." He said as he handed it to me. If the label was to be believed, it was a genuine article from the Land of the Living. Sometimes reapers bring back more than just new souls – unmatched socks being very popular as a gag. "When we get a couple of minutes, we'll drink a toast to your new enterprise."

Max reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a little black-and-gold laminated card of some sort.

"And here – your very own pass to the High Rollers' Lounge." He huffed at me. "You're one of our crowd now, Calavera. Don't be a stranger."

He nearled flattened me with a hearty slap on the back and went into the restaurant.

"You okay, boss?" Lupé asked when I regained my balance.

"Sure." I said. "Nothing a week in traction can't fix."

Things went pretty well that night. Even without Max's gang, the place would have been packed – especially the casino. If I could keep that up, things were going to be all right. Of the invited guests, only Olivia and Toto were no-shows.

Glottis was pretty amazing on the piano. Lola and Max started a little 'stump the demon' contest. No one ever did.

Then there was a funny little sing-along led by, I was surprised to see, the dour Membrillo. It was pretty off-colour, but we were all big boys and girls. A different kind of craziness reigned inside the casino. A lot of Max's gang were huddled around the craps table bleeding from their wallets and downing whiskey like it was water; come to think of it, the whiskey *was* mostly water. Velasco was holding court at a poker table (I gave instructions that he should come out ahead), and several well-heeled, probability-challenged souls were busy losing big at roulette.

Things were looking good. Real good.

The evening was wearing on a little when Lola edged up to me at the bar where I was listening to a tight-as-a-drum customer lecture the bartender on the correct way to shake a martini (something to do with the rhythm).

"Hey, Manny." She said to get my attention.

"Yeah?"

"I think we might have a problem."

"You think?"

"Well…" She said reluctantly. "There's this guy in the casino…"

"What's he doing?"

"Nothing."

"Passed out?"

"If it was *that* kind of problem I wouldn't have to bother you. No, this guy is just standing there, staring at everyone else."

"Show me." I said.

We went to the doorway of the casino and looked in. I sighed when I saw the figure Lola was referring to.

"Okay, I want to see that guy in my office."

"Manny?" Lola asked in surprise.

"Tell him the boss wants to see him. Now."

Lola looked mystified, but turned to do as I said. I went to my office upstairs. Less than a minute later, Lola's problem knocked on my office door.

"Come in!" I said, and he did.
This time, he wore a dark suit but still carried himself like a solider. It was Salvador.

"Well, Sal – mind telling me why you're trying to queer my racket?" I asked, trying to sound as serious as possible.

"Manuel?" Salvador asked, puzzled at my tone of voice.
I sighed. "I'm playing a dangerous game here, Sal. You know that perfectly well. Now, downstairs I've got Maximino and half his gang, several city big-shots including the Chief of Police, plus an assortment of other high-fliers, legitimate or otherwise… and in this town it's hard to tell the difference. What I *don't* need is the head of the LSA coming in and making a show of checking out the joint."
I shaded my eye sockets with one hand and did an exaggerated impression of scanning the horizon.

"Surely it is not that bad, my friend." Salvador tried to say placidly. I wasn't having any of it.

"Yeah, it's that bad." I ticked the problems off on my fingers. "You're in a crowded casino and you're the only one who's not at a table or sitting in a booth, the only one without a drink in his hand, the only one not getting chummy with anyone… do I have to go on? People are starting to talk." Or at least, just Lola so far. I wanted to keep it that way.

"I apologize." Salvador said, sounding genuinely contrite. "I did not realize how out of place I must look."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry I'm getting so bothered." I rubbed my temples. "The pressure has been really something these last few weeks. It's no picnic getting a place like this ready to open. If you wanted to check the club out, why didn't you send Eva or anyone else who could blend in better? No offence Sal, but you're a little too intense for Rubacava's nightclub scene."

"Perhaps you are right, Manuel, but I wished to see what you had accomplished for myself. And besides, Eva co-ordinates our day-to-day operations. She wishes she could have come, but…" He shrugged off whatever came next. "It may be better if I were to leave now."

"That'd look even more suspicious." I pointed out. I unlocked one of my desk drawers. "Hold out your hands." Salvador did so, and I dumped some chips into them. "Go play blackjack. Order a drink. Act like a customer."
Salvador looked very uncomfortable all of a sudden. "I do not know how to play blackjack."
Somehow, I wasn't surprised. "It's simple." I said, and quickly spelled out the rules. "Remember, you're only competing against the dealer, but pay attention to what's been dealt to the other players. And try to look like you're having fun."

"I will do my best, Manuel." Salvador stood and went to the door, but hesitated. "Would you happen to have a liqueur called *Marillo de Oro* on hand?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why?"

"I had a glass the night –" He broke off, and finished differently. "Well, I will go try to blend in." He nodded solemnly and left.

When I came down from my office, I found Membrillo collecting his hat and coat from Lupé.

"Leaving already?" I asked. "Well, I hope you had a good time."

Membrillo shrugged slightly. "The time passed rather pleasantly."

"That's all?" I asked. I turned to Lupé and said aloud, "I'll have to try harder."

Membrillo put his hand on my arm gently and spoke quietly. "Don't take it personally, Manuel. You can only hope for so much in a world such as this."

"Then why do you stay here? Why not head off for the Land of Eternal Rest?" I asked.

"Manny…" He said with a grim shake of his head. His voice sounded far more morbid than usual, if that was possible. "You can only search for something for so many years before you stop believing in it altogether."

I was stunned. That response took me entirely by surprise. "You don't believe in the Land of Eternal Rest?" I asked incredulously.

"Why do you think we're all here in Rubacava?" He asked.

"Because you're waiting to work off your time, or you can't afford passage on a ship, or…" I shrugged, but Membrillo cut me off.

"Manny…" He interrupted, sounding tired and speaking as if he were explaining things to a slow child. "We've given up. All of us. When you've been here long enough, you will too." He patted my shoulder gently.

"Maybe you've given up, but what about the DOD? What are we here for if this world is all there is?" I countered.

"We're in hell. The myth of Sisyphus tells more truth than many realize." He put his hat on and nodded slowly. "Good night, Manny."

He left without another word.

There was only one other piece of excitement that evening. Carla was packing down the alcohol as usual and got it into her head that Meché had to be in the club. She tried to form all the women in the joint into a line for my inspection. Lola grabbed Carla before she could cause too much trouble and marched her into my office where she promptly passed out for the rest of the evening.

It was very, very early in the morning when I was in my office looking over the receipts from our first night. I should have gotten some sleep first, but I was too eager to see how we did. Carla's shoes were on the floor by the couch, left behind when Glottis had picked her up to take her home to bed. There was a soft knock on the door and Lola came in.

"Hey there." I said groggily. "I thought you left with Glottis."

"No, I've been straightening things up a little." She replied, sitting down on the edge of a chair.

"Plenty of time for that after we all get a little rest."

"What about that?" She asked, pointing at the papers on my desk.

I laughed. "Okay, you got me. I wanted to see what our take was."

"Any good?"

"We're in the money, angel. We could be out of debt in a matter of weeks if tonight isn't a fluke."

"That's great, Manny. I'm happy things are working out for you."

"Things are working out great for *all* of us." I said cheerfully as I got up to go to my private bar. "In fact, let's drink to our success!"

"Manny…" Lola said gingerly. "There's something I gotta talk to you about."

"Well, talk away. I'm in a very receptive mood this morning."

There was kind of a long pause before Lola finally went on.

"I won't be working here any more."

I put down the shaker and turned to face her. It didn't quite hit me for a few moments. "*What* ? Why?" I finally managed to say. My mind began racing through the possibilities. "Is this anything like when you ran out of that road stop?"

"No." She replied firmly. "It's nothing like that. Just the opposite, actually."

"Well, I'm more than a little confused."

Lola stood up and paced around a little. "I'm not sure how to explain this." She paced a little more, then finally stopped. "Well, you know how I've told you people always treat me like their kid sister or something?"

"Sure."

"Well, you've been different. When you needed someone to help you keep an eye on this place while it was being remodelled, you picked me of all people. I've never had responsibility like that before. You listened to me when I had something to say – usually – and sometimes you backed down when I got up the nerve to argue with you."

"Sounds like you had a pretty good experience here." I ribbed.

"Yeah, I have. It's been great working for you."

"So why leave? This place won't run itself, you know. I still need your help."

"Glottis can give you all the help you need, if you let him."

"That's not an answer. Why leave if things have been so great?"

"Because, well…" She paused thoughtfully, as if it pained her to speak her mind. "Because I've had to take responsibility for things. Stand up for myself. I found out I can do it. Now I want to do it for myself, on my own."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Photographer. People come through town, see the sights, and want their pictures taken. I had a camera when I was alive, and I was pretty good. I still am. So I've set myself up to do souvenir photos."

"You're all ready to start?" I asked.

"Actually, I already have… using whatever spare time I could find. Now the club's finished, I'm done here. Tomorrow I start making a go at being a full-time shutterbug."

"Well…" I said, turning back to the drinks I was mixing. "I guess we'll be drinking to something else, then." I finished up and gave Lola hers. I held up my glass to her. "To your new endeavour. All the best."

"To Calavera Café." Lola smiled up at me. "Ditto."

Year Two

Chapter 21 – Feline Meadows

The club did alright. In fact, it did great. Though it was a little difficult at first without Lola. I had really gotten to depend on her, and I began to miss her. But she turned out to be right: Glottis could help out running the place, even if he did need more supervision. That was a little more work for me, but I didn't mind. We were raking in the dough, and I soon had to make a decision about whether I should try to pay off my debts early or stick to my self-imposed schedule and funnel profits to the LSA as soon as there were any. Well, it wasn't *that* tough a decision. As much as I would have liked to be free and clear, the LSA needed money right away. So within about a month of opening, money from the club was going to Salvador through my LSA unit.

For a long time I was bothered by what Membrillo had said on the club's opening night. I had worked at the DOD long enough to know that he was wrong. The Land of the Dead wasn't a great place to be in, he was right about that, but what got to me was the fact that Membrillo's belief was keeping him here when he could easily buy a steamship ticket at any time. But he wouldn't, only because he thought that was part of the torment. I told myself it was no business of mine what Membrillo believed. He was only hurting himself, after all… but it didn't work.
Even though I knew he was wrong, there was this little voice in my head that kept asking if maybe he wasn't and if I was so sure I was right. That kind of doubt was something I didn't need. So Membrillo *wasn't* really hurting just himself. Who knows how many people he had convinced he was right? And besides, I thought of Membrillo as a friend. He wasn't just a client, someone I could simply send on his way and forget about. But there was nothing I could do about it. Membrillo was sure he was right and that was that. It just really, really bothered me.

Even though Lola didn't work at the club any more, she was still around. She worked around most of the nightspots in town, including Calavera Café, and we still both stopped at the Normanby. She wasn't making as much money as she would have with me, but she said she was making a decent amount and was happy with what she was doing – so that was more than fine with me. She also worked around Feline Meadows, not that she did much business there. People were too busy with the cats to want their picture taken. She did most of her business there in the High Rollers' Lounge whenever Max had a party, but not really enough to justify hanging around there. Truth be told, I think she only did it because she had a thing for Max. I suppose that must have started when we ran into Max at police headquarters after the sprouting, but it took me a while to notice it.

Lola would have been better off just working the more profitable spots, but I supposed she knew her business. When I spoke to her about Max she insisted she knew what was what.

In the middle of the club's third week open I decided it was time to pay my respects at the track. I was sure my staff could handle things, and they knew where I was going to be. So I went down to the track, picking up Carla along the way, and flashed my card to the demon-goon at the elevator. After a quick, smooth ride up, the doors opened to the kind of opulence that made my club look like a rat hole.

"Wow!" Carla exclaimed as we got a good look around. She stumbled a little on the deep carpet.

"Should've worn your flats." I said.

"Uh-huh." She said absently, craning her neck to take in the giant golden cat statue that dominated the centre of the room.

I snagged a passing waiter. "Hey, where's Max's office?"

"Are you expected?" The guy asked in an exaggeratedly snooty tone.

"I'm Calavera." I said, wondering if that would get a reaction. It got enough of one, but not what I was hoping for.

"I see." The waiter sniffed. "Well, his office is right over there." He pointed to a recessed doorway off the main part of the lounge.

"Thanks." I replied as I led Carla toward the door. "Suppose they're paid to act like that?" I asked her.

"Dunno." She said. "But I'm feeling a little above-it-all just being here."

"Yeah, and I got a kick just outta flashing that card. Maybe I need something like that for my club, something to make the regulars feel special."

"What could be more special than just being in Calavera Café?" Carla asked in a silly tone.

"Well, this joint for one thing."

We got to Max's door, and I decided to knock. After a short pause, it opened. One of Max's boys looked us over.

"I'm Manny Calavera." I said casually. "I'd like to see Max, if that's okay with you."

The guy shrugged. "Sure, Calavera. The boss says you get the red carpet."

He let us into the outer office – a kind of small, smoky lounge where a handful of guys sat around a table looking sharp-but-dangerous. Some were playing poker.

"Weren't you at my club's opening?" I asked, taking the chance that I really might recognize the guy.

"Yeah." He said gruffly. "Dropped a bundle at your craps table, too."

"Sorry to hear that." I said, obviously not the least bit sorry. "But when you gamble, sometimes you lose."

"Oh, I ain't kickin'." He said. "Max says you run honest tables. That's good enough for me." Suddenly he jammed a forefinger into my ribs. "I'd be real sore if I ever found out that wasn't true."

"You don't have to worry about that. Maximino knows what he's talking about. Come by the club sometime, maybe you'll get your money back."

That seemed like enough to mellow the situation.
"Go on in." The guy grunted to Carla and me, jerking a thumb towards the inner door. "The boss's been waitin' for you to pay him a visit."

Max's office had an even fancier layout than the lounge. Between the door and the huge desk on the far-side of the room lay a marble floor inlaid with a beautiful rosette carpet and a cat-race motif (like everything else in the place). The far wall was a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the track. Max was staring out of it when we came in.
"Hello, Maximino." I said as entered.
"Why, if it ain't Manny Calavera!" Max said heartily when he eventually turned around. He approached me with his hand extended. "Come to see how the big boys play, eh Manny?"
I gripped his hand with mine and let him crush it. "From what I can tell, they play with kitties." I joked, hoping he would find it amusing.
Maximino gave a throaty laugh. "Kitties, roulette wheels… what's the difference? They go 'round and 'round all day long, and they're both more reliable when they're fixed! Am I right?"
"Well, I wouldn't say so publicly." I replied.
"Me neither." Max chuckled back. "So, who's your lovely companion, huh?"
"Oh, this is Carla." I said as Max took her hand and did a small, polite bow over it. "She actually works for you, Max."
"Yeah, over at the 515 security gate." Carla said. "But I've never been up here before."
"Well, don't ply your trade around here, young lady." Max waggled a finger in a mock scold. "My boys might just take it the wrong way. On the other hand…"
"Max…" I said in a half-joking rebuke.
"Just kiddin'." He waved. "Come on over here, I wanna show ya somethin'."
He gestured for us toward the windows. We crossed the office, passing a large cabinet on the way.
"Very impressive trophy collection." I awed.
"Paws of fire, every one of my babies."
"You know," Carla said. "I get the feeling you're not much of a dog guy, Max."
"You know me better than I thought. Now just look at that view!" He said absently, pointing down at the track below.
"Wow, you can see everything." Carla marvelled.
"Nothing in the way from up here, no sir!" Max said proudly. After a moment of taking in the view, he turned and pointed to a drinks trolley beside the desk. "Hey, Manny. Why don't you… oh, hell."
His voice broke off as a man dressed in the sharpest suit I'd ever seen entered the room. I instantly recognized him as the same guy who had been with Olivia at the Blue Casket the night I mentioned Salvador to Gunnar.

"Sorry, Maximino." He said in a cold Welsh voice. "But…" He held up a sheaf of papers.

"Yeah, yeah." Max said sternly. "Just put 'em on the desk. I'll look at 'em later." He gave a bothered sigh. "Manny, this is my lawyer, Nick Virago. Nick, Manny Calavera."

"Oh, yes." Virago said with a slight nod. "You're shorter than I expected."

"I don't mean to be." I said back.

He made a quiet growling sound and turned to Max. "They'll need an answer by tomorrow. I'm told they don't like waiting."

"Yeah, I know. I'll get to it tonight."

Virago nodded and left.

"Nick handles all my headaches." Max said tiredly. "And brother, do I ever have one right now."

"Trouble?" I asked as I went over to the trolley to mix some drinks.

"Just tryin' to close a business deal with some boys who aren't making it easy." Max shrugged. "But I won't bore you with that."

Max didn't bore us with anything that evening. I'll say this for him: Max knew how to entertain his guests, and I certainly learned a few things about playing host. We stayed a lot longer than I had intended, but a couple of phone calls to the club reassured me that everything was okay. Eventually, I made my excuses and Carla and I left for the club.

When we got away from the track I took a deep breath. The air was getting cooler and, no lungs or whatever, it still felt good – especially after all that cigar smoke I'd eaten.

"Max sure throws a swell party, huh?" I said.

Carla laughed too loudly. "You said 'swell'!"

"What of it?"

"Nothing, I guess. You're just cute when you show your age..."

She gave a haggard stumble sideways, almost as if she wasn't used to walking properly.

"You really should have worn your flats." I said when I caught her.

"I should've gone easier on the booze. Oh, well." She sighed. "Die and learn!"

I chuckled. "That's a good one."

As we walked on, Carla began to straggle a bit. Eventually I gave a lengthy sigh and tugged at Carla's arm to try and get her to pick up the pace. "C'mon, maybe Meché's at the club."

"Oh, why are you so interested in that woman anyway?" Carla grumbled.

"I've told you before. I let her down and I gotta make up for it. That's all."

"Yeah, and I bet you've let a lot of women down, Manny. I bet that's why she ran out on you. Maybe you just don't know how to hold onto a woman, you ever think of that?"

"You're drunk." I said without stopping.

"So am I!" She exclaimed.

I gave up.

Chapter 22 – Disappointment

Meché wasn't at the club that night. Or the next. Or any other, for that matter. It got to me, the one black mark on the club. My name was up there in lights on the hottest new night spot in Rubacava, and the one person it was meant to draw in was a no-show. Each night I was sure that this was the night. And then… the big letdown.
The club itself was a blast. A lot of hard work, but a real blast. And yet, it was a complete failure in the most important reason for being there. Oh sure, I was sending a small fortune of money to the LSA, and that was good. I was proud of the progress that was being made; but failing to lure Meché, it was kind of a hollow pride. It was just a case of wanting to find Meché but instead finding only disappointment. Yet despite the disappointment, I'd take Calavera Café at its worst over the DOD's best any day. Besides which, Glottis was the real party animal of the place, so I don't think anyone really missed me when I scoped out the night's suckers and then went back to my office to sulk drearily and teach my scotch who was the boss.

There was just one other blemish besides the absence of Meché: Police Chief Logan. The guy was a real headache. He wanted to win at the wheels all the time – and I don't mean simply more than the regular customers, I mean *literally* every single time. He wouldn't pick blackjack where he had some realistic chance. No, it had to be roulette. Maybe he was really into watching that shiny little ball spin around, I don't know – but I had to keep him happy to keep my deal with Max (on top of the 'fee' he got for the bets my customers phoned in to his track). It wasn't easy, that's for sure.
Logan's 'luck' was so unreal that it started to tarnish my reputation for honest tables. The regulars knew the score and were sympathetic, but there were a few loud-mouths who decided to spread their gripes around. I'm sure that hurt my business at least a little. Once, on a visit to the track, I got up the nerve to talk to Max about it. I was getting the feeling that Max actually did like me – at least in a cold, professional way – so I was pretty upfront about the problem.
"You know, Max." I said in a friendly, yet stern tone. "I don't mind showing people a good time – that's why I opened a club in the first place – but Logan is kind of abusing my hospitality."
Max stared bluntly at the decaying ash on the end of his cigar for a couple of seconds. Eventually, he answered without looking up at me.
"Yeah." He growled deeply. Max then took a deep breath and turned to face me. "I'm sorry, Manny. I really am. I was tryin' to solve a problem when I steered Logan your way, not make a bigger one."
I was a little surprised to hear Max apologize. He seemed sincere, but I figured it was best not to drop my guard.
"I'm not sure I understand, Max. What problem were you trying to solve?"

"Well… let's just say you're not the first operator that bastard has put the screws on." Max said gruffly. He gave an angry shake of his head. "The guy's corrupt, but he's a prig. Do you have any idea what a tough combination that is? Of course, you don't. I'll tell ya, he wants a piece of my dough – of OUR dough – but ya can't buy him off, or give him a dirty cut! That damned hypocrite! I don't mind crooked cops Manny, but they gotta be straight about it. You get me? I try to bring Logan into the organization… and he threatens to enforce the blues against me! I just can't control him." He shrugged helplessly. "So, I hear about your little club and I think maybe I can get the heat off. The cats don't always run the way he wants, I can't help that. They don't always run the way *I* want. This joint is way too big to make the races *that* crooked. But a casino… I had a gambling joint once when I was alive. It's easy! Not my racket now, I learned that the hard way… but I thought maybe Logan would ease off if he got his way a little more often."

"Only it hasn't worked out that way." I finished for him.

"Tell me about it…" Max growled. "The guy's gettin' outta control. He can win all the time at your club, and still he wants even more. He's like a dope fiend, Manny. The more he gets…" He shrugged again.

"It just feeds his habit." I said.

"Yeah. Damnit, I wish I'd thought of that first." He shook his head. "I hear some of the things the complainers are saying about your joint. You're a straight shooter Manny, and I've been letting people know that, but…"
He took a moment to pause. I never expected to see Maximino getting this badly worked up. He poured himself a glass of straight rye, but just swirled it around in his glass, staring intently at the light glinting within the amber liquid.

"Well, I appreciate that, Max." I went on. "Truth be told, all my regulars know I run honest tables – mostly – but I think Logan's making it hard for me to get any new customers."

"Yeah, and that son of a bitch is queering my rackets a little, too."

"I hadn't heard that." I admitted honestly. Maximino – the big boy, the high roller – had the entire town in his vest pocket, I always thought. What he was saying was fresh news.

"Well, it's true. Maybe I'm not hurt as much as you are, but I don't like the situation any better. Now, you've always been level with me Manny, so I'll be on the level with you: I'm seriously thinking of whackin' the bum."

"What about 'no rough stuff'?" I asked.

"I meant it. I learned my lessons, I'll tell ya that twice. I'm just thinkin' that there's no other way out, that's all. Something's gotta be done… I'm just not sure what, yet."

"Well, I guess I feel a little better." I replied calmly. "Misery loves company."

"Ain't *that* the truth…" Max growled heavily, downing his drink in one swift gulp. "When I make up my mind, I'll give you a piece of the action, okay?"

When I got back to the club that night, I went up to my office to go over the accounts and see how much damage Logan was really doing. I was a little surprised to find Glottis there.

"Takin' a break, *carnal*?" I asked.

"No." He answered slowly. "Lookin' for some sheet music. I *know* I left it in here somewhere…"

"You should have sent Lupé up. It's a tight squeeze for you up here." I told Glottis as I tried to edge past him to get to my desk. "It's a tight squeeze for me too, right now."

"Sorry, Manny." Glottis said, trying to suck in his gut. "But I kinda think you wouldn't have much of an office left after she got done looking."

"You might have something there." I said, finally getting around him. Lupe had all the enthusiasm of a tornado. "Is this new or old music you're looking for?"

"New."

"Well, there's a little package for you over there." I pointed over to a small, mostly decorative writing desk that sat in a corner of the office. "Is that what you're after?"

"Oh, yeah! Thanks." Glottis tore open the package and took out his music. He thumbed through it, and then looked over at me getting down to the books. "So how much damage *is* the police chief doing this month?"
Sometimes the demon was a mind reader.

"Could be worse."

"Yeah, but every time he's in here, it costs the LSA another round of Sproutella, huh?"
I gave him a sour look. "C'mon, buddy. The way you talk sometimes, you'd think the LSA were the bad guys."
He just shrugged back. "It's my nature, Manny. I don't like to see people get hurt."

"Yeah, but just remember that we're all trying to *stop* people from being hurt. And if Hector's gang suddenly wants to get tough about it, that's their problem. Just remember what this is all about, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Manny. Okay."
I looked over the numbers for a while. Glottis mingled around.

"Well, this doesn't look too bad so far." I said. "You know, when we leave here, I'm actually going to miss this place."

"Aw, Manny, why can't we just stay here?" Glottis said, sounding a little petulant. "We got our fancy club, we got three squares a day – plus, we look good in these clothes!" He beamed as he hooked his thumbs on his XXXL suit lapels and puffed himself up like a rooster.

"Glottis, I can't stay in this world forever! It's not where I belong. I've got to find Meché and help her, because if I'd been more on the ball… she'd have been on that train a year ago."

"Okay then, Manny." Glottis sighed.

"Well, you'd better get back to your keys before we have a riot."

"Yeah, they might have to call out the National Guard." He chuckled.

Chapter 23 – She Sailed Away

The next night, I arrived at the club a little later after it opened.

"Evening Lupé." I said as I came in.

"Hi, Manny!" She exclaimed excitedly, jumping up from behind the front counter. "I *have* to tell you about my new organizational system for the coats!"

I winced silently inside. She had a new system every other night, it seemed, each more bizarre and pointlessly complicated than the last, when anything along the lines of 'old man with glasses' had always seemed good enough for me. I changed the subject quickly.

"Think she'll come in tonight?" I asked hopefully.

"Manny…" Lupé said earnestly. "You ask me that every night. What am I supposed to say?" She pleaded.

"You're supposed to say: 'Yes, I think tonight's the night!'"

"Yes." She said firmly. "I think tonight's the night…" She paused, taking a deep breath before finishing with, "that you finally go *nuts* from waiting for the grand entrance of Miss Mercedes Colomar!!"

"I'm *not* giving up on her." I insisted, mainly for my own benefit.

"Hey!" Lupé exclaimed. "I don't want you to give up on Mercedes! Just have more realistic expectations, that's all. I hate seeing you get your hopes up like this night after night."

Lupé might have been loopy, but she had a soft heart.

Still, I was her employer, so I kept things… not exactly hard. "Well, you could be a little more encouraging. Let's try again, shall we? Think she'll come in tonight?"

"Could be, Manny." She answered gamely. "Just… hang in there."

"Thanks." I replied. The kid was a trooper. "It's my fault she's out there in the woods alone, you know."

"If you say so, Manny." She said with a sigh.

I shrugged out of my coat and passed it to Lupé, along with my hat.

"So how's the flow tonight?" I asked.

"We're dead tonight, Manny." She answered without a single trace of grim irony. "Everybody's back home for the Day of the Dead, I guess. Except for the casino – the casino's hopping. Why is it that the same people who don't go home are the same people who just love to gamble?"

"Well, I guess when you've got nothing to go home to, you've got nothing to lose." I replied bleakly.

"Hey!" She exclaimed again. "We should put that over the door!"

Was she kidding? I didn't bother finding out. I just turned around and went to check out the dining area, but quickly turned back to ask, "Logan come in yet?"

"Yeah…" Lupé grumbled. "He's down in the casino, probably enjoying his usual 'lucky' streak."

I turned around and stomped into the restaurant area.

The restaurant was pretty much deserted, just as Lupé said, with only two or three tables occupied. Nobody was at the bar, apart from the bored bartender polishing perfectly clean glassware.
Glottis was extemporizing at his piano, the brandy-snifter turned tip-jar completely empty.
"Quiet night, huh *carnal*?" I asked in a low voice.
"Day of the Dead ain't good for business, chief. But last night…! Remember last night, Manny? *Hoo-wee!* " He replied cheerfully. The demon was in his element when the joint was jumping. A big party was as much his meat as a humming engine, it had turned out.
"You think she'll come in tonight?" I asked him.
"You know what, Manny? I think she will! I got a feeling tonight's the night!"
"Thanks, *mano*."
Glottis always gave the right answer without prompting.

I went into the casino. Lupé was right again: it was packed to the brim. Unfortunately, Logan was part of the scene. I looked at the large stacks of chips in from of him. It must have been three times as large as some of his previous hauls, and the night was still early. *Way* too early.
I went over to him, clapping a hypocritically-friendly hand to his shoulder.
"You know…" I said sternly to him. "Some people say you should always walk away from the table when you're on a winning streak."
"Oh, yes." He replied, faking agreement whilst fingering his badge so it would glitter in the lights. "But I'm feeling *extra* lucky tonight."
From him, that was practically a threat.
"Great." I said, catching the gaze of the croupier who shrugged hopelessly. I looked around, but didn't see any of Max's boys. Well, I doubted I could've bought them off anyway; there was no way they'd make a move without Max's say-so – not for any amount of money.

Turning away from the roulette tables, I saw there was another unwelcome presence in the casino – 'Chowchilla' Charlie, in his regular booth. He was my least-favourite customer after Logan. I could never remember when he first started coming on, but he was kind of like a kick in the head: amnesia followed by a sudden and mysterious pain.
I slid into the seat across from him. He barely looked up.
"Mind if I sit down, Charlie?" I asked sternly.
"Of course not, Manny." The little weasel replied. "I mean, it is your club, right?"
"Right." I said in as hard a tone as I could muster. "So what are *you* doing in it? Didn't I tell you not to come back until you could pay your bar tab?"
"Oh…" He laughed, as if I had told a joke. "They threw me out of that cat track for printing fake betting stubs. So now I have to come here." He suddenly stopped, realized how that sounded, and then quickly corrected himself. "…which I love! Which I *love*!"
He gave a little nod, like he was agreeing with himself.

"How did you print fake betting stubs?" I asked, almost curious. Charlie always had some kind of scam going on. The law of averages said he'd pull one off, eventually.

"With this." He said, taking a little machine out of his breast pocket. "Isn't she beautiful?" He asked in a perverted tone. I kept a close watch on it as he turned it over in his hands, hoping he'd put it down. "The last time I was incarcerated, I shared a cell with the most dishonest conman I ever met. He was strictly small time," Charlie added with a sniff, fancying himself a big-time operator, "and I managed to steal this from him quite easily."

Charlie placed the machine on the table, patted it, and then reached for his cigarette resting in the ashtray.

I quickly snatched the machine and pocketed it.

"Thanks." I said, as Charlie lunged for me. I leaned back in my seat to evade him. He was even shorter than me, and not just in the legs. "You never know when something like this might come in handy."

Like a paperweight, or a doorstop.

Charlie reached across the table to make another grab at me.

"Hey, give that back to me, Manny!" He begged feebly. Heads at a nearby poker table turned toward us, saw who I was tormenting, and turned back to their cards with knowing laughs.

I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him hard back into his seat. "Maybe once you settle your bar tab, eh Charlie?" I said with a low growl.

"Oh, Manny…" He said with a sad shake of his head, staring morosely at the ashtray.

"What else can you counterfeit?" I asked, a little curious despite myself.

"Nothing." He answered sullenly, but then almost immediately looked up at me slyly. "*Any*thing."

"Can you make, say, passports?"

"Oh, Manny." He exclaimed with a slight chuckle. "You still think like a living man in so many ways! No soul needs a *passport*. We are all citizens of the same nation, and our king rides a pale horse."

"So." I said, lighting a cigarette of my own. "No passports."

"No, no. That little hologram is so tricky, you know?"

"Hmm." I replied, a little sceptical. "So why aren't you over at the roulette tables or something?"

"Ah," Charlie growled, "roulette is for lonely widows and Frenchmen. Why don't you get some slot machines, Manny? Everybody – old women, little children – they *all* love slot machines! And I have a system…" He continued in a conspiratorial tone. "An infallible system for beating them."

"Oh second thought, stay away from my roulette tables." I huffed in a nonchalant way. "Besides, I think slot machines attract an undesirable element."

"Oh, well. We're all undesirable, Manny."

"Yeah, only your credit's no good, to boot." I said, stubbing out my cigarette. Talking to Charlie was leaving a bad taste in my mouth. "Well, I've got a club to run, so…"

"Oh yes, please, Manny… get on with your *glamorous* life."

I got up and began walking to the door, when Lupé burst in.
"Hey, boss." She said excitedly. "I've got a customer asking for you!"
I threw a look back at Charlie. "I think I've done enough mingling with the customers for one evening."
"Well…" She said slyly. "You may wanna 'mingle' with this one. She sounds like your type."
I still didn't know I had one.
I gave a tired shrug. "Okay, let's see her. Might as well find out what my 'type' is."
Lupé giggled and led me through the restaurant to her counter. Nobody was there.
"Huh!?" She exclaimed. "She was right here! Seemed kinda anxious, too."
"Did you get her name?"
"No, but she said she had to see you right away. Why'd she leave?"
There was a noise from the front doors as an ocean breeze from outside pulled them open briefly. Lupé quickly shoved one open and stuck her head out. "Maybe she's waiting outside." She said.
"Well, I'll check it out." I replied. "You'd better get back to your new system."
"OKAY!" She exclaimed, throwing herself back over the counter like a soldier saving his buddies from a grenade.
I walked outside and exhaled. It was getting pretty chilly these days, and even without lungs I could see the brief white cloud appear and dissipate before me. I looked around.
There was no one in the parking lot. I went over to the observation platform I put in after one of Lola's customers had nearly backed over the edge. It was dark, but I thought I saw someone by the railing.
My shoe scuffed on some gravel and the figured turned partly toward me.
"Manny…?" A woman's voice said – a voice I heard in my dreams and nightmares for nearly a year. But now, the voice sounded lost – cold, and saddened, as if some great tragedy had befallen it.
"Meché?" I asked in disbelief. I was certain – it *was* her!
"Manny, help me…" She pleaded. "I've been lost for so long! Why didn't you look for me?"
"I did!" I said helplessly. "You ran off. Why…?"
Her shoulders heaved up and down in a huge sigh. "Because you said I was no good…"
I felt a deathly chill in my marrow. I had replayed that interview in my office over and over in my mind. There was so much in her body language that I had come to miss. I didn't realize then what effect I was having on her.
All the guilt I felt seemed confirmed.
"I've been alone in the world for a whole year…" She continued, tears evident in her voice. I came closer, slowly…
And the figure whirled around, fully facing me at last.
"*And it's all because of YOU!!*" The voice shrieked.

I jumped back in horror as the demonic raven-creature – complete with a human head, able to imitate human voices – launched itself from the coin-operated binoculars on which it was perched. I ducked low as it swooped over me. It wheeled around and dove over the cliff face. I ran across and looked over the edge. I saw a little speck moving towards the docks used by the *Nada Mañama* cruise line. I fumbled around in my pockets for a coin and hastily dropped it into the binoculars. I swept my gaze across the docks and quickly picked up the raven. I followed its path of flight as it glided past a steamship – the *Lambada*, which was currently loading passengers.
Suddenly, I let out a gasp and forgot all about the bird as I turned back to the people still on the dock.
There was Domino… with Meché. She appeared to be putting up something a fight, with futile results.
I whirled around and sprinted away from the club as fast as my short legs would carry me. I reached the base of the cliff within moments.
Unfortunately, I was fighting with the night crowds as I ran to the docks.
By the time I got there, the ship was already pulling away; the last gangway being drawn up. I took a running leap across the gap and managed to grab onto the edge. I clung there for dear life, feeling my ribs ache with the impact.
Meché appeared in the hatchway as I struggled to get my legs up into the boat. I began to ask for her help, when without warning she hefted a champagne bottle directly at my forehead. I seemed to go blind for a moment when it collided with my skull. Naturally, I lost my grip and plunged into the icy sea below.
The next thing I remember was Velasco pulling me out.

He took me back to his office and got me into some dry clothes. After a moment, he poured me a stout drink of rum.

"Is this how you celebrate the Day of the Dead, Manny?" He huffed at me with the slightest shadow of a smile. "You toss your bones into the drink, and I fish 'em out?" He laughed heartily at his own joke.

"I don't plan on making a tradition out of it, Velasco." I replied, gulping the dark rum down. "As soon as I find out where that liner's going, I'm after it."
Velasco laughed again. "That ship's going to Puerto Zapato! And it'll be the last one for a while. Why, there ain't no ships going out that way now except the ol' *Limbo* here, but…"

"But nothing!" I interrupted angrily. "If the *Limbo*'s my only hope, then I'm already on board!"
Velasco snatched the glass away from me, like I'd already had too much.

"Manny, Manny, Manny…" He said with a shake of his skull. "The *Limbo*'s not a passenger ship! She's small cargo, son – and every hand on board works!"

"I'll work." I said matter-of-factly.

"I told you, she's not a passenger ship… they don't need a baccarat dealer."

"What? You think I've only got one talent? C'mon, Velasco. I've *got* to get on that ship. I can't let Meché get away from me!"

"Look…" Velasco said sympathetically. "I know how you feel, son. Once I lost a very special lady m'self. I waved to her from the docks as she sailed out of port… and I never saw her again."
I'd never heard Velasco talk about his past this way before. Come to think of it, I don't think I'd EVER heard Velasco talk about his past before.
"What was her name?" I asked.
"The SS *La Mancha* was her name. But don't make me talk about her, 'cause I… I just can't do it."
Figures 'she' would be a ship.
"Well, I'm sorry for *your* big loss, but I still gotta get on that ship! Don't you have some kind of authority around here?"
"I can't make a captain take on crew he don't need!" Velasco snapped impatiently. But then, he sighed. "The *Limbo*'s gonna be around for a couple more days. Crew's takin' shore leave while we do some work on her rusty engines. Something might open up. I'll let you know."
"Okay." I said, not feeling very relieved. "I guess that'll have to do."
"You said it, son. Now go get some of your own damn clothes, I'm gonna need those overalls sometime."

Chapter 23 – Talking Limbo

I went back to my hotel and changed into my other tux. I still had a club to run, even if suddenly my 'heart' wasn't in it. I arranged to have Velasco's overalls washed and sent back to him.
Lupé did a double-take when I walked in wearing different clothes.
"Hey…!" She exclaimed.
"Had a little accident." I replied glumly, and left it at that.
She shrugged, but stopped me before I could leave. "I've got a telegram for you!"
"Yeah? Okay." I said, taking it and hoping it was good news.

BEWARE MANUEL FOR YOU ARE IN GRAVE DANGER STOP SOMEHOW RUMOUR HAS SPREAD ON THE STREETS OF EL MARROW OF YOUR PRESENCE IN RUBACAVA STOP IF THIS INFORMATION REACHES HECTOR LEMANS HE WILL SURELY SEND HIS EVIL OPERATIVES AFTER YOU STOP YOU MUST GIVE UP YOUR SEARCH FOR MERCEDES FOR THE TIME BEING AND PLEASE BE OUT OF RUBACAVA ON THE NEXT SHIP
SALVADOR LIMONES

Well, so much for good news. He was probably exaggerating the danger, but I suddenly felt like an idiot for putting my name up on the big sign. On the other hand… was it coincidence that Domino made sure I saw him with Meché just when Salvador got wind of trouble?
Somehow, I didn't think so.

I looked in on the restaurant area. It was completely empty now, except for Glottis, who was still at the piano working on a mellow noir-type song he'd been composing for a while. I decided to get straight to the point.

"I just had a run-in with Domino and Meché." I said quickly. "We're leaving town as soon as we can."

"Wha'?" Glottis exclaimed. "How?"

"Domino's got Meché. We're going after them."

"But what happened?"

"I saw Domino dragging Meché onto a cruise ship. He had her around the waist and was trying to pin her free arm. She didn't have a chance to get away."

"Sure they weren't dancing?" Glottis asked.

"…What?" I exclaimed, stunned with disbelief. "Why would they be dancing?"

"'Cause they were happy? Maybe she *wanted* to go with him."

I suddenly felt angry enough to bust something. "*They weren't dancing, OKAY!?*"

Glottis blinked at me a couple of times. Finally, he spoke in a calm tone, completely indifferent to my outburst. "Sure, Manny. Okay."

I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

"Look, Velasco might be able to get us jobs on a cargo ship. We've got a couple of days. Get your affairs in order and be ready to go."

"Sure, Manny."

"Good."

At that moment, one of my regulars suddenly came boiling out of the casino.

"Logan!" He snarled as he stomped past me.

I felt my temper rising again. Never in my death had I been this enraged.

"Okay, that's it!" I said to Glottis as I turned to go to my office.

"What're you gonna do?" Glottis asked worriedly.

I just kept going.

I had, hidden away in my office, a little gadget that let me monitor the casino and, shall we say, influence certain events. It was also the very same tool that Logan took advantage of. I switched off his luck with the flick of my wrist and listened to the fireworks.

"This is an outrage!" Logan's tinny voice growled when the ball fell its own way. "I bet on number TWO! Why didn't it come up number two!?"

There was some laughter in the background. I too chuckled at Logan's childish complaint.

"Ah *Monsieur, je suis vraiment désolé*, I do not pick the winners." The croupier pleaded innocently. "These things are all controlled by the man upstairs."

I winced at his poor and unfortunately far-too-accurate choice of words.

"Well." Logan said gruffly, knowing full-well who had queered his lucky streak. "Please tell the 'man upstairs' that Police Chief Logan was *very* upset when he left, and when he returns he would prefer to have better luck!"

"*Oui, Monsieur*. *Bon soir*." The croupier said. "I will definitely tell him."

That was a mistake, making Logan angry. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but then, *I* was angry too. I wasn't thinking straight, and it made things harder for me later on.
For the rest of that night (and most of the next day) I felt pretty good for sticking it to Logan. I was still feeling positive about things when my office phone rang a little before noon.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Manny? Velasco. You still interested in the *Limbo*?"

"You know I am."

"Well there's an opening in the crew now. There was a little accident this morning. The *Limbo*'s chief engineer got pretty badly hurt. Most of the important pieces are still sticking together, but he's no good for manual labour anymore. I was thinking your buddy Glottis would be perfect for the job. 'Course, he'd have to get his own tools."
Now that was good news. Not for the engineer, of course, but I couldn't help that.

"So…" I said, summarizing the conversation. "If I get Glottis some tools, we can board?"

"Uh…" Velasco hesitated. "*He* can, yes. No offence Manny, but there's still no room for *you* on board the *Limbo*. She's already fully manned, and most of the crew's accounted for."

"*Most* ?" I asked.

"Well, it probably doesn't mean anything…" Velasco hedged.

"C'mon, Velasco. Spill it or you'll have a one-man riot on your hands."

"Well, no one's seen seaman Naranja lately… but he'll be here before they set sail."
Not good news exactly, but promising. "What job did Naranja have?"

"He runs the Galley."

"Ah-ha!" I exclaimed triumphantly. "Restaurant management!"

"Yeah." Velasco laughed. "It's similar to what you're doin' now, 'cept the fish is fresher on board the *Limbo*."

"What if Naranja doesn't show? I can fill his spot, right?"

"Manny…" Velasco exclaimed tiredly. "You're not even in the maritime union!"

"You know that, and I know that, but we're two guys who can keep secrets, right?"

"Glottis is exempt, being a demon." He pointed out. "But the captain will ask to see your card, and if you don't have one, they'll feed you to the sharks like chum. And what's worse, *I'll* get fined!"

"You're all heart, *mano*."

"Hey, it's a tough union, boy – and I don't mess with 'em."

"Okay, then. Suppose I get a card…"

"Which you'll never get."

"And Naranja doesn't show up…"

"Which he will."

"*Then* will I get on the *Limbo*?"

"Oh…" Velasco groused, taking several long moments to gather his next words. "I guess so! If Naranja's not on board when they're ready to sail, I guess they'll have to take any cold body I can find. If you've got a card, that'll pass muster… but you're on your own there, son. How you get one is your business."

"Okay. So what kind of tools does Glottis need?"

"Authentic Sea Bee equipment only."

"And where do I get that?"

"Why don't you try askin' a Sea Bee? 'Fraid of getting stung?" Velasco gave a hearty laugh and hung up.

I put the receiver back down and drummed my fingers on the desk. I was a little irritated with Velasco. It wasn't good enough that only Glottis got on that ship, and he knew that. I wasn't trying to just get him a new job: we *both* needed to get after Meché.

But I wasn't being fair – Velasco was doing what he could and maybe more than could be expected. So I needed to find Glottis the right tools and track down this Naranja, if I could, and try to fix it so I could take his place.

And then there was the matter of the union card.

Chapter 24 – High Roller

Deciding to keep the club open, I sent word to Salvador that I was probably leaving town soon and that he should send someone to Rubacava to manage the club while I was away.

I didn't have much luck getting Glottis any Sea Bee tools. You couldn't just buy that sort of thing off the shelf. On top of that, I didn't know how to go about finding a sailor on liberty leave.

Logan never showed up that evening. I took that as a good thing.

But Charlie did show. Not so good, exactly – but useful, perhaps.

"Can you make reasonable union cards?" I asked softly when I sat down across from him.

"Manny!" He exclaimed. "Are you going to start moonlighting, or are you just looking to hang out with the sailors?"

"Can you do it or not?" I asked shortly.

"I have a deal for you." He replied slowly. "If you can retrieve my money from Maximino, I can make you *president* of that crooked union."

"I don't need to be president." I said. "And why does Max have your money?"

"I put a whole suitcase of it up for collateral on a rather large wager last month at the track." He rambled, shaking his head angrily. "The race was fixed, Manny. They stole my money like common thieves!"

I didn't make a sound, or even twitch. It was a pretty strange story… I mean, where would *Charlie*, of all people, get a suitcase full of money? And why should Max even bother robbing him? A suitcase of money was just loose change to Max. It didn't add up.

"There should be a safe somewhere in the wine cellar." He was saying, obviously oblivious to my not listening. "And my suitcase should be in it."

"And you can get me a card tonight?" I finished, driving the point home.

"If you make it back, Manny… the card will be on the table."

Frankly, it sounded like a wild goose chase, but it needed to be looked into anyway.

I went over to the High Rollers' Lounge. When I got out of the elevator, one of Max's gang – I think it was that same guy who opened the door for me the other day – spotted me and waved me over.

"The boss was just calling your joint." He said. "He wants to talk to you."

"What about?" I asked, wondering whether Charlie had set me up.

The goon only shrugged.

"Well, Max probably knows." I stated the obvious. "I'll ask him."

"Good idea."

When I got to Max's office I found him sitting behind his desk chewing on a cigar. There were several butts in the ashtray, all of them torn up on one end and nearly pulverized on the other after being violently stubbed out. I guessed he was having a bad day. He got right down to business, not even offering me a drink. A very bad sign.

"I've been hearing what you did to Logan last night." He said in a low growl. He remained seated in his blood-red, leather-upholstered executive chair. Another bad sign, Max not getting up to play host nor asking me to sit myself. "Not smart, Calavera." He shook his head slowly. "Not smart."

It was much harder trying to keep my 'expression' blank than it had been with Charlie. Max, I knew full-well, had the power to make me disappear.

"In what way?" I asked as evenly as I could.

"He's mad. I hear there might be a raid on your joint."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed. There hadn't been a raid on anything bigger than a drug store slot machine since before I had arrived in Rubacava.

"Do I look jolly in any way to you, Calavera?" Max snapped. There was a dangerous edge to his voice that he had never aimed in my direction before.

"No." I said firmly.

A small, nearly unperceivable sigh escaped Max. Some of the tension seemed to leave the room.

"In other circumstances, this would just be *your* problem, Manny." He went on. "But we're close associates… maybe even partners once your operation gets big enough. Unfortunately, that's not a secret." He waved the hand holding his cigar in a broad, meaningless gesture. "You see my problem?"

I nodded sternly. "I do, Max. If *I* get in trouble, *you* get in trouble."

"You got it. I guess you haven't lost *all* your marbles." He crushed what remained of his cigar into the ashtray. "Well, on the plus side, I've made up my mind about Police Chief Logan: I don't have any choices now. If he moves against us…" He trailed off, and then gave a simple shrug. "Well, I gotta protect my side businesses."

"Side business?"

Max chuckled. "Manny…" He chided. "Let's just say our El Marrow associates appreciate our… out-of-town perspective. That's not something I can afford to jeopardize, especially if both of us want to stay chlorophyll-free."
I felt a deep chill. Could Max be talking about Hector LeMans? How close had I come to working both sides?

"Anyway." Max went on sternly, biting the end off another cigar and lighting it. "This is what I really wanted to talk to you about – I'm gonna take care of Logan, and I know I promised you a taste, but you're not gonna get it. Not after the gag *you* just pulled."

"Well, I understand, Max. I'd do the same thing in your place." I said, feeling relieved in more than one way. "You know, I would've asked to be let out if you hadn't already insisted. I know enough to admit when I've screwed up."

"That's mighty white of you, Manny." Max said, suddenly relaxing. "I was hoping you'd say something like that." He waved casually over to the drinks trolley. "Pour us a couple, huh?" He leaned back in his chair, clearly pleased with his underworldly business acumen, and blew a large smoke ring at the ceiling.

"You got it, Max." I said as I poured a shot of rye for Max and a scotch-and-soda for myself. Before I turned around, I felt Max staring at me. I turned around to stare back at him. "Got anything else on your mind, Max?"
He chewed on his cigar for a moment before replying. "I don't think my message could have gotten you here *this* quick. I'm thinking maybe there's something on *yours*."

"Oh." I said, suddenly remembering why I had come over. "I wanted to talk to you about Charlie's money." I decided to play it straight with him, but Max just started to laugh. "No, seriously…" I went on. "He says you have a lot of it."

"Oh, I got a lot of it." He said, still laughing harder. "But none of it's his, that's for sure. What's he been feedin' you, anyway?"

"Just fish stories." I quipped. Max roared with laughter and pounded his desk. Phantom tears appeared at the corners of his eye sockets. I finished pouring the drinks and gave Max his. "He was saying something about a suitcase full of money."
Max's laughter stopped like someone switching off a radio. "You really don't wanna be askin' about that." He warned.

"Probably not." I said. "But I need something from him. Do you at least have the suitcase? Or one like it?"

"You wanna cross him up?" Max asked. I got an impression of raised eyebrows.

"Something like that."
Max shook his head. "I don't know, Calavera. He may be all by himself, but he can be *very* dangerous."

"Well, if I get what I need, I'll be leaving town for a while."

"Hey, that's great, Manuel!" He said cheerily. "No one deserves a vacation more than you. You know, that might make it a bit easier to deal with Logan, too." He paused for a minute to throw back his rye. "Okay, I'll play along. I'll get you that suitcase." Max chuckled. "In fact, he can have all the money back. That'll make everything perfect!" Maybe it was just me, but Max seemed to be almost talking to himself, so I kept quiet. "Okay, you go into the lounge for a while. Wait ten minutes and you'll find the suitcase by the elevator. I know I can trust you to keep your mitts out of the sugar." He huffed. That last bit was part faith and part warning. It was almost enough to make me feel guilty about using him.

"Sure, Max." I replied, downing my drink.

Ten minutes later, I went back to the elevator and picked up the suitcase. The weight of it was far less than what I had expected. On the way down, I got an itch that just had to be scratched.

"I wonder what's really in here…?" I said to myself as I reached the bottom and popped the case open around a corner.
Inside was quite possibly either the most awe-inspiring or the most horrifying thing I'd seen since arriving in the Land of the Dead.

"*Dios mio!* " I exclaimed. "It's full of Double-N tickets!! This could get over a hundred souls on the Number Nine train!" I quickly slammed the briefcase shut. "Something's not right about this…" I grumbled to the thin air around me. Maybe Max was setting me up. He was a gangster, after all. I had screwed up and it would make sense if he wasn't as forgiving as he had seemed. Well, I was kind of committed. It was either keep going down, or take the lift back up to the lounge and find a window to jump out of. Bad as things might be, that wouldn't have done the trick.

Outside the lobby, there was no one in sight except the guy you had to show your pass card to. He made no move to stop me. When I came out of a little corridor into the main concourse, however, there was Charlie… holding a sprouting gun.

"All right, Manny!" He growled wildly. "Give me the case!"

"Charles!" I said, playing it Bogart. "I thought we had a bargain?"

"Oh, we do." He replied. "But I thought I'd bring a little muscle along, just in case you wanted to get cute." He waggled the gun in a way he probably thought was menacing.

"What's the matter, Chuck?" I needled. "Can't afford to hire goons to do this sort of work for you?"

"I'm all the goon I need!" He snapped. "Now drop it!"

"You said it, chief." I shrugged as I placed the suitcase down between us and took a step back, holding up my hands. Even if Charlie wasn't all the goon he thought he was, a daisy-maker was a daisy-maker no matter whose finger was on the trigger. "Got a card for me?" I asked.

"Here." Charlie grunted as he took a card out of his breast pocket and dropped it at his feet. He picked up the suitcase and started to back away.

"Welcome to the union, Manny." He said. "Meeting's first Tuesday of every month. Don't forget to pay your dues…"
He turned heel and trotted off.
I couldn't help but laugh afterwards. "Don't forget to pay my dues… Hah!"
I picked up the little card. It looked alright… as far as I could tell.

Chapter 25 – Trouble with Carla

Afterwards, I felt a little wobbly. A delayed reaction from having a sprouting gun pointed at me, I guess. I decided to leave through the 515 terminal. Since it was still the Day of the Dead, it should have been pretty quiet over there and I didn't want to be seen shaking like a leaf, not when it would be known that I had just been visiting Max. Metaphorical tongues would wag.
I had intended to just pass by the security gate, but when I came into view I was surprised to see Carla sitting there.

"Wow! Manny Calavera! You *never* come up here anymore." She exclaimed. It hadn't even occurred to me that she might somehow be working that night.

"Well…" I said, coming over to her desk and hoping I hadn't flinched too obviously. "I thought you could use the company. What with everyone gone for the Day of the Dead."

"In that case Manny, why don't you stick around until six? That's when I get off…" She purred. I could sense a wink emphasizing the propositional double entendre.

"Busy night?" I asked, sitting on the edge of her desk.

"Hardly." She scoffed. "Everybody's at home for the holiday. This place is *dead* and I'm bored, Manny… *bored*."

"So, how'd you get stuck working tonight?"

"Believe it or not, it was my own bright idea. Last year, there was this huge fight between my sister and her husband. For all I know they're divorced… or worse. I kinda don't want to know, you know? Working gives me an excuse to stay away. How about you?"
I just shrugged. "There's no one back there I want to see. Haven't been there for years, 'cept on business… and I know you don't want to hear about that."
Carla cocked her head at me. "You never talk much about your life, do you?"

"Well, you get to be closed-mouthed about your past at the DOD. When everybody you know is up shit-creek too…" I trailed off.
Carla nodded at me with a vivid smile and I pulled out a couple of cigarettes, offering one to her.

"Thanks." She said. "But not when I'm on duty."
I lit mine up anyway. "So, why haven't you been by the club lately?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Manny… it's your little coat-check girl. All that bubbly energy… I just want to strangle her!"

"I've tried that. It doesn't stop her. Tell you what, though – I can hop over to the club, grab a bottle, and we can slip into the back and—"

"That back room is all business, Manny. And so am *I*."

"What kind of 'business' goes on back there, Carla?" I teased.

"Strip searches." She said simply, but before I could say anything to that opening, she added with a sigh: "And you don't qualify."

"Now why don't I qualify for a strip search?" I asked, leaning close and kind of enjoying myself.

"Manny…" Carla said seriously, drawing herself back. "I agree it would help to pass the time, but we have procedures and rules here." She suddenly leaned very slightly closer, and went on in a lower voice. "And you never know when *they're* watching…" I glanced up at the CCTV camera. Now I could see why Carla was so paranoid. "I can only strip search people when a regular search turns up nothing. And you're not even travelling..."

"That's a point." I said. "Well, you can't blame a guy for trying to liven things up a little."

"And I appreciate that. But I got myself into this, and I'll survive – even if I do hate every minute of it."

"You don't mind if I stick around for a while, do you?"

"Of course not." She answered.

"Good, 'cause I probably won't be around for much longer."

Carla stiffened up in her chair. "You're leaving, Manny?" She asked, almost panicky. "For good?"

"I haven't worked off my time yet. I can't *leave* leave, and you know that." She relaxed a little. "Just a vacation? You could take me along too, I'd like that! We could find a cosy little cabin and never set foot—"

"No. I've got some serious business to take care of down the line. I'm not sure how long it'll take, and it won't be much fun."

I sensed Carla go a little cold. Her next words carried anger in her voice.

"It's *her*, isn't it? You've heard something about that Mercedes Colomar chick at last, haven't you?"

I sighed.

"*Haven't you!?*" She demanded.

"Look, Carla…" I began.

"Carla… *what?*" She snapped at me. "Which *lie* are you gonna feed me this time, '*carnal*'?" She added venomously. "First, it was just a snafu. Then *you* made the mistake. After that it was your saintly moral duty! And let's not forget the line about 'it's business, not personal'. *I'm sick of it, Manny!!*" She practically screamed. "How long are you gonna *toy* with me?" She pressed her hand to her sternum. "I'm *here*. I'm *available*." She protested, almost in tears. She reached out and took my hand with her other. "What's wrong with *me!?*"

I was speechless. She let my hand go and shook her head strongly.

"No. The *only* woman you care about is that Colomar dame. Every time I try to get close, you throw that 'saintly' woman back in my face! Well, get this through your stupid thick skull, Calavera: *she split on you!!*" She snarled, before taking a shaky, deep breath. "I don't know *what* she did to you, but I'm *done trying to figure it out, pal!*"

"Carla…?" I began again.

"*Get out!*" She shrieked at me. When I didn't move – I couldn't move, I was so stunned by the scene – she surged up from her chair and took a swing at me. "*Get the HELL out of here!!*" I backed off. "*I never wanna see you again!!*" She moved around her desk and began swinging senselessly at me. Needless to say, I took off.
As I ran out of the terminal, I could still hear Carla screaming at me and sobbing uncontrollably.

"*¡Hijole!*" I exclaimed when I got outside. I fell back against the wall and took a lot of deep breaths, waiting for the constant shaking to go away.
No doubt about it… I just couldn't read women. Carla had groused about Meché before, but I never saw *this* eruption coming. First I drive Meché into the woods; then Carla into a hysterical, jealous rage.
Eventually, I gave a deep sigh and started walking. I felt awful for what had happened. I wondered what trauma I had ever inflicted on Eva. No, Eva was made of pure iron… I hoped.
"Well, I'd better get on the *Limbo*." I thought to myself. "'Cause the bridges are burning behind me."

Chapter 26 – Lola's Last Photo

I was halfway back to the club, when I was stopped in my tracks. Several people looked at me curiously. I whirled around and changed direction.
"*Logan!!*" I exclaimed to myself. If Logan was thinking of a raid, he could make it tough for me to leave town. I had to take care of that possibility right away.
I ran into the Blue Casket to find my gang. I spotted them almost instantly, but I also saw something else that distracted me.
Parked at the back of the club, near the double-doors to the kitchen and the door to Olivia's 'office' or whatever she called it, was Lola in her working clothes. As I walked over, I noticed she was fiddling around with her large camera.
"Lola!" I said when I got close enough for my voice to carry over the deep music. "What are you doing *here*? This crowd doesn't go much for souvenir pictures… 'cept maybe of Lenin."
"Manny!" Lola exclaimed, making swift shushing motions with her free hand. "I'm on a stakeout here! I'm gonna prove to Maximino once and for all that Olivia's no good for him."
"Still hung up on Max, eh?" I sighed. She really never knew when to throw in the towel. "Take my advice, angel: forget about him. He's a gambling racketeer."
"Like you?" She asked slyly.
"Oh, that hurts, baby."
Lola sniggered. "Well, tonight's the night I get the goods on sweet, innocent little Miss Ofrenda. When Max knows what *I* know… *sssh!* Here they come!" She yanked me back into the shadows beside the kitchen doors.

Lola readied her camera as Olivia's door opened.
Olivia stepped out, followed by… Nick Virago?
I shook my head, not believing what I was seeing. Lola had actually been onto something big all along.
"Come on, sugar." Nick cooed. "How about a kiss for the road?"
"Oh, *ick*." Olivia exclaimed. "Don't let me down, Nick."
I smiled inside. I was appalled by what I was seeing, of course, but Olivia always did have style.
"You're a lawyer." She went on. "You're not supposed to have feelings."
"I don't." Nick said frankly. "But I know a good tart when I see one."
I suppressed an agitated groan. Nick had excellent dress sense, but no style at all.
When they went into their sickly clinch, Lola snapped a picture and then vaulted toward the exit.
"*Hey!* " Nick exclaimed when the flash went off. He immediately sprang after Lola. Olivia grabbed his arm and jerked him back effortlessly.
Nick wrenched away from her again.
"If Maximino sees that photo, we'll end up in matching terracotta pots!" He growled.
"Don't be silly." Olivia said sweetly. "Max wouldn't hurt *me*. He *loves* me!"
Nick gave a cold scowl and jogged out of the club.
I took a step forward. No point in hiding now.
"Manny!" Olivia exclaimed happily, throwing her arms around my neck and suggestively grinding her pelvis into mine. "At last, we're alone!" Not counting the gross of souls in the Blue Casket. "Tell me, how *are* the bourgeoisie?"
"Fine." I said gruffly. "How's Max?"
"Oh, gramps!" She pouted, pulling away – making me feel both relieved and frustrated – before lighting a cigarette. "Don't start."
I moved a little closer to her so I wouldn't have to speak too loudly. She looked up quizzically at me.
"What are you doing with a snake like Nick?" I asked.
"I'd lay it on ya Manny, but…" She laughed girlishly. "I don't think you'd get it."
I shook my head. "Messing around with your boyfriend's lawyer is pretty dangerous."
"Oooh!" She exclaimed, suddenly surprised. "Maybe I was wrong. You *do* get it!"
I sighed. "I'm worried about Lola."
Olivia blew a hot jet of smoke in my face. "That's because she's doomed, Manny. She fell in love with Maximino! That's the one mistake *I* never made."
"Do you think Nick would hurt her?"
"Only if he finds her. And take it from me," she said with a wink in her voice, "he's not good at finding things." Olivia chuckled gently. "But, don't let me keep you from your *camaradas*." She added brightly.
"Huh?"
"Hey, man." She said, suddenly serious. "I know the reason you're here."
I felt a little cold. "You do?"

She laughed again. "You may swing with the Man, daddy, but you get your action here. Have fun!" She gave me a caressing pat on the back and went into the kitchen, still laughing.
I shook my head slowly. "Whatever you're having, kitten…" I said quietly toward the doors. "Save some for the customers, huh?"

I went back onto the floor and made my way towards Alexi's table. I sat down quickly and Slisko started to object.
"Hey—!"
"Can it." I said bluntly. "We've got work to do."
"This isn't smart, Manny." Alexi said. And of course, it wasn't. A civil sit-down with these hipsters was never something that should happen in public.
"Smart or not." I went on. "We're on a tight deadline here."
"What's up, brother?" Gunnar asked, picking up on the seriousness of the scene.
"Logan."
"Logan?" Slisko asked, surprised.
Alexi nodded knowingly.
"Yeah, I pissed the cube off." I answered. "Now I hear the heat is gonna raid the club."
"I heard something about this from Glottis this morning." Alexi said. "So what?" He leaned in a little closer in order to speak lower. "I don't see how this justifies breaking cover."
"If Logan's gonna raid the place, that might make it tough for me to leave town." I said. "And it's time for me to scram."
Alexi leaned forward some more, this time in excitement. "You've made contact?"
"Sort of. I saw Meché… with Domino Hurley." I said. Slisko whistled through his teeth. "He was dragging her onto a cruise ship."
"*That's* a problem…" Gunnar said. "I think that was the last float until spring."
"I know it was." I grumbled. "But I've got one chance – a cargo ship. It'll be tricky to swing it, and I don't need trouble from Logan. Some interference would be a big help."
"Okay." Alexi said. "We've got the scene. What's our part?"
"Well, just how close are the Sea Bees to striking?"
"They're an oily rag, man." Slisko said. "And we're like an open flame!"
"Can they go up before tomorrow night?" I asked.
"Tomorrow!" Gunnar exclaimed, ever the practical, cautious one.
"What's the problem? You've been telling me they're just waiting for the word."
"Yeah, man." Slisko said. "But not from *us,* man!"
"The thing is, Manny…" Gunnar explained. "We started flying under the radar, educating the more progressive workers…"
"…building a vanguard." I supplied.

"Right." Gunnar replied. "Problem is, the cat they really take their directions from – a Sea Bee named Terry – got himself into trouble. He got a little excited, made one of our kinds of speeches in public, and Logan got wind of it."

"That truncheon with legs doesn't pay attention to *us* any more." Slisko said. "No more than the union does. But, Terry!" He exclaimed with admiration. "He stirred up the Man something fierce, and got himself jugged."

"He's in jail? How long ago was this?" I wanted to know.

"Two weeks." Gunnar answered.

"Two *weeks!?* " I exclaimed. "What was the charge? Inciting a riot?"
I surely would have noticed if there had been a riot.

"Brother, the charge was disturbing the peace." Gunnar answered.
I was totally floored. I knew Logan was corrupt – I even had Maximino's word for it – but this was too much.

"That's overnight and a fine!" I exclaimed angrily. "And Logan's getting away with this?"

"Hey!" Slisko exclaimed with a snarl. "Does the *Man* care!? Like I've been tellin' ya—"
Alexi cut him off with a sharp rap on the table. He needn't have bothered, though – skulls turned toward the loud noise, saw it was only Slisko shooting his face off, and turned away again.

"Well…" I said with a tiresome sigh. "I guess we've gotta spring Terry."

"How?" Alexi asked. "The brother hasn't been before a judge yet, so he can't even post bail. He can't afford a lawyer 'cause he was laid off months ago, and our dog-house public defender is just sitting on his can."

"I think maybe I can put a sharp lawyer on the case." I said, an idea forming in my mind. "If I play it right, I might even be able to get Terry out tonight." I paused to think. "But that's 'if'. Can you guys prime the Sea Bees for Terry's release? Get 'em ready to strike the moment that cat gives the word?"

"Yeah, I think so." Alexi said cautiously. "But Terry'd *have* to give the word himself, brother. What kind of action are you looking for?"

"Big. Spectacular, but focused." I said. "And keep it far away from the *Limbo* cargo ship."

"The *Limbo*?" Alexi asked, momentarily puzzled. "Oh, right… your transport."

"Well, I hope so. I've got a few things to work out first. For one thing, I need to get Glottis some Sea Bee tools."

"Hell." Slisko said. "If you can spring Terry, he'd give you his very own *mother*. He's goin' stir crazy, man!"

"Good, I guess." I replied with a shake of my head. "By the way, any of you guys hear of a sailor named Naranja?"

"Yeah." Gunnar said. "He's on a major bender. Try Toto's place; he usually ends up there getting carved."

"If he's not passed out under a dock someplace." Alexi chuckled.

"Okay, I'll try Toto first." I said. "Is there anything else we need to cover?"

"Manny…" Slisko said after a moment of silence. "Are you sure about this? I mean, staging a strike just so you can duck Logan?"

"You guys have been working towards this for a long time." I said. "Does the timing matter all that much?"

"I dunno, man." Slisko said doubtfully. "Maybe it doesn't. I just dunno."

"Look." I said sternly. "I think maybe I know what the problem is. You've been organizing the dock workers out of principle, and now I'm asking you to goad them to strike right now because it's expedient for *me*. Am I right?"

"Could be." Was all Alexi said.

"Okay, I guess I can't give you a reason for liking it any better. I could make a lot of nice-sounding excuses, like Logan's distracted right now and now's a good a time as any. But I won't try to pretty-it-up. I'm gonna tell you men the hard truth. I *need* to get after Meché and I really don't care what it takes. You know how important she is to the cause, so the question I have for you is this: are you willing to take a step you've been dreaming about, even if *my* motives aren't pure red?"

There was a long pause while the three looked at each other.

Finally, Alexi spoke.

"You get Terry released, and we'll take care of the rest."

"Okay. Thank you. I'm depending on you cats. *Viva la Revolución*."

They echoed me quietly as I got up and left.

About half an hour later, I finally got back to the club. I was heading up to my office when Lupé hollered out my name.

I wearily walked over to her counter.

"I have a note for you from Lola." She smiled.

"Lola?" I asked in surprise, perking up a bit. I had forgotten all about her.

"Yes. Now where is it…?" Lupé chirped as she dived under her counter to look. "Where, where, where?" I heard her muttering to herself. "*A-ha!* " She cried out after a few moments. "*Here* it is!" She sprang up and handed me the rumpled envelope.

I opened it up without hesitation and read the note. It sounded urgent and rushed; Lola thought she was being followed and that she wanted me to meet her at the lighthouse immediately. The writing was a little difficult to understand – being a hurriedly-sloppy scrawl – but it was definitely Lola's.

"Did you speak with her?" I asked Lupé. "Is Lola alright?"

I knew I sounded panicky.

Lupé gave me a questioning look. "She was a little mussed, like she was in a big hurry. I guess she's okay, but I didn't really have time to ask her. She just gave me the note and vamoosed. What's wrong, Manny? Is Lola in some kind of a jam?"

"I'm not sure." I said. "But I hope not. If Lola comes back while I'm gone, get her up to my office and keep her there. If she makes a fuss, call…"

I hesitated. My first instinct was to say Carla, but I had to rule that out. Olivia? She was too boxed or blasted right now to be any help. The cops were out of the question, since Logan was on the warpath. So I settled on…

"Call Glottis over, and have him sit on her if he has to."
"Sure thing, Manny." Lupe said as I rushed out once again.

I headed for the lighthouse as fast as I could, which wasn't too fast. It was out beyond the opposite end of town and I was battling the night crowds to get there. All the back-and-forth action of the night was beginning to make my head spin, and the cold ocean air was making my joints ache.
When I finally reached the tall, foreboding lighthouse, there was no sign of Lola outside. I looked up at the top of the lighthouse, but the shining beacon of brightness made it impossible to make anything out. I could sort-of hear the lantern turning around in its dome, and I thought that maybe I could hear something else… something unidentifiable, but definitely something else. In this remote part of Rubacava, the bustling night time crowds were only a faint drizzle in the distance of my hearing.
I slowly opened the rusty-iron door and ascended the spiral stairwell within. Finally, I reached the top, and came out in the little glass room that held the lantern. There was nothing of interest there, so I walked out onto the catwalk that ran around the outside of the lighthouse dome. The lantern was unbearably bright, and the spectacular dazzle made everything pitch-black wherever it wasn't pointing. The sound of the whirring motor was much louder up there, but suddenly, I heard something.
I heard it long before I saw anything else.
There was a slight rustling noise, and a low, raspy voice connected to it.
"Manny…"
"Lola?" I called out. I took a tentative step forward, and my foot bumped into something oddly yielding.
"Careful, Manny…" The voice gasped. There was a short pause before she went on. "You may not want to see me like this…"
At that moment, the intense light made a pass across the spot where I was standing. The light was nearly as blinding as the darkness itself, but as it flashed by I could easily make out the shape in front of me.
The dishevelled figure of Lola, crumpled down by the railing, the major portion of her body blurred by hideously-spreading greenery.
"Lola!" I managed to exclaim, kneeling down beside her. "Did Nick do this to you?"
"Yeah…" She answered in a near-whisper. "He must've wanted that picture real bad, but he's never gonna find it… that fink."
She released a painful gasp and curled into a ball. I reached out and held her closely while the stinging leaves took her. I could feel the sickening vines spreading through her as they brushed against my bones, and various buds began to burst open and bloom. After a short moment, she relaxed slightly.
"I'll get him, Lola." I promised her quietly, sounding dangerous even to myself. "I'll show Max the picture for you and fix Nick for good." I gave her a gentle shaking when she seemed to relax too much. "Just tell me where you hid it."

She abruptly stiffened up again. I thought I must have hurt her, but then I saw the feathery bluegrass growing out between the joints in her skull.

"Oh, Manny…" She groaned. "It's all my fault." She was beginning to slur her words. "Always falling for the wrong guy. You know, I even had a thing for you once." I went cold, almost numb. She seemed to want to smile. "But you were so hung up on that Meché woman, I…" For a moment, Lola gagged on the green twigs coming through her jaws. "I figured I didn't have a chance."

"Oh, Lola…" I said in a near-whimper. Just then, I fell hatefully in love with her off-centre face. She turned her moss-rimmed eye sockets fully toward me.

"Tell me, Manny…" She asked, almost clearly. "Would I have had a chance…?"

I turned my head away for a moment. I couldn't help it; the guilt was just too strong.

She nodded gently, as if she could feel my anguish. "Never mind." She sighed. "Just warn Olivia for me. Tell her to improve her taste in men, or she'll end up just like me." Her limbs began to twitch feverishly, but she didn't seem to notice it. "Tell her to find a nice guy, Manny… like you."

Her entire body went tetanus-stiff, before suddenly going limp.

The daisies finally bloomed out in her eye sockets.

"Lola!" I shook her, not caring anymore if I hurt her. I just wanted a reaction; *any* kind of a response. "*Lola!?!*"

Naturally, she didn't respond. I fell back against the railing, letting her slip gently back onto the catwalk.

"Oh, Lola…"

Something clattered onto the metal catwalk, but I didn't pay any attention to it. I just stared blankly at the tangled bush that had once been Lola, feeling something I couldn't define dying inside me.

I don't know how long I sat hunched up on the lighthouse. For hours maybe, I just sat there, staring at what was left of Lola, and thinking that I never knew what she thought of me. It had never occurred to me that I was anything more than just some guy she had met at a road stop one day and then went to work for… just like I never noticed that Carla cared TOO much, and was perhaps a little unstable. Or that I was telling Meché… I don't know what, exactly. And what effect did I have on Eva?

I shied away from letting my mind go back to when I was alive. I'd been at the DOD far too long for that kind of introspection.

"Is *this* what I am?" I wondered. Was there something dark inside of me that made me destroy every single woman I came across? I liked women, and not just for the obvious reasons. So why couldn't I ever see what I was doing to them? Why didn't I go after Lola right away? My business at the Blue Casket could have waited… what had I been thinking? Just of myself, and nothing else, apparently.

I shifted position and my foot kicked the thing that had fallen when Lola had gone limp. I picked it up slowly, grateful for the distraction. As the lighthouse lamp swung around, I saw that it was a small plastic card, identical to the one that we had used at the Rub-a-Mat to label the food slots. It had the number 22 on it, and a little picture of a tongue sticking out between two slices of bread.

"*Lengua*..." I said to myself.

Then it hit me.

"*Lengua*? Toto!!"

It didn't take long to get to Toto's scrimshaw parlour. He was working on someone I didn't recognize on sight. I still felt a little numb. I just walked in and began flipping through his binders.

"*Hola*, Toto." I heard myself say. "*Cómo estás?*"

Toto growled something in one of the languages he liked to swear in, and grunted his reply. "Not now, Manny. I'm in the middle of something with Naranja here."

Funny, I should have been elated. I had found my missing sailor without even trying. But somehow, I didn't much care anymore.

Naranja took a hefty swig from a bottle that had been resting on the counter beside him. I walked over to take a look at the design Toto was working on, and the ones Naranja already sported. Naranja lowered the bottle carelessly and hit me in the chest with it as he tried to set it back on the counter.

I snatched it from him.

"Strong stuff." I said, looking at the label and seeing it was mostly absinthe spiked with a tiny amount of Sproutella – a mixture that had recently been made legal despite the obvious danger. "That oughta kill the pain."

"Should, but it don't." Naranja said, slurring the sentence into one long word. He was probably already tanked when he came in. He wasn't going to get any more numb, that's for sure. I, on the other hand…

Toto interrupted that chain of thought. "I kill the pain!" He said in a sneering tone. "Turn off drill, stop working now! How 'bout that?"

"No, no, no." Naranja protested. "I can take it! Bring it on, pops!"

"I'll 'pop' you, sailor boy…" Toto grumbled. He then turned his head slightly to me. "Don't you have some fancy club to run someplace?"

Naranja took his bottle from me and hefted another swig. He then gave it back to me. Apparently I was the new drinks holder, and suddenly two surprisingly clear thoughts entered my skull.

The first was that I'd never get anything out of Toto so long as he was working. The second was that I could get Naranja out of the way right now, without drawing any suspicion.

Sometimes a customer was too much trouble for the bouncer, or maybe we just didn't want a scene. Either way, there were quieter ways to get rid of a problem than grabbing it by the pants and flinging it out the door. I fished around in my coat pockets and found a tiny pill.

Naranja was watching Toto, and Toto was watching his work. Without either of them noticing, I broke the little capsule over the mouth of the bottle.
A minute or two later, Naranja took another gulp. He then got very relaxed, almost blissfully, and quickly turned into a limp sack of bones.
Toto put his tools down and swore loudly. He rapped sharply on Naranja's skull and shouted at him. "Wake up!"
It didn't do any good. My customers always got the best, even when they didn't expect it. Or want it.
I helped Toto drag Naranja over to the dirty old spring-bed Toto kept at the back of his shop. Then he stomped away to straighten up his work area, muttering angrily as he did so. "Some sailor, can't handle his booze…"
I waited until Toto was out of earshot.

"Doesn't look like you'll be showing up for work any time soon." I said quietly to the unconscious Naranja. I made sure Toto's back was toward me before patting Naranja down for anything of interest. All he had on him was a wallet with a few bills, his union card and a set of dog tags. I slipped them from around his neck and looked them over. Just his name, rank, and pay number. I absently put the tags in my pocket, but as I did so my hand brushed against the small plastic card I had found at the lighthouse.
I fished it out and turned back to Toto.

"This mean anything to you?" I asked as I held out the *lengua* card.
Toto looked at it blankly for a couple of seconds, during which I thought he might be about to start swearing again.

"Oh, oh!" He suddenly exclaimed. "Yeah, Lola was here. She left something for you. Sweet girl, like daughter to me!" Toto felt around his counter for a moment and finally located a small envelope. "She don't come around here so often anymore." He said sadly as he handed it to me. "Tell her Papa Toto says hello, but is very cross." He waggled his finger in a mock scold.

"Right." I said quickly, pocketing the envelope next to the dog tags. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

When I got back outside, I found a lamp post where I could see what I was doing. I pulled out the tiny envelope, snagging Naranja's dog tags with it.
I stuffed them hastily back into my pocket and opened up the envelope.
Inside was a juicy photo of Olivia and Nick kissing. It was Lola's last photo, and just looking at it made me shiver. I returned the snapshot to the envelope and put it into my breast pocket.
I resumed my walking, hands in trouser pockets, fiddling absently with the dog tags.
Suddenly I stopped, took out the tags, and a devious thought hit me. I swore at myself loathingly, and considered hurling the tags out into the sea.
But I couldn't. I knew I had to keep them.

Chapter 27 – Habeas Corpus Delicti

I returned to the lighthouse, cursing myself for my sick mindset every step of the way. I climbed back up to the catwalk and sat down again beside Lola.
I took out the tags again, allowing them to dangle freely.

"I don't know if you can hear me…" I said slowly. "But I gotta tell you about what I have to do. You're gonna hate me, I think. I know *I* hate me, but I told my gang I'd do anything to find Meché. And I'm going to, even if it *is* the worst thing I've ever done. Even if you are my friend and I never knew…"
I broke off, unable to finish that thought.
After putting the dog tags back into my pocket, I started undressing Lola.

"I wish I could ask for your help, angel. Maybe you'd *want* to help me. You were always a real trooper."
The leaves and flowers rustled mockingly as I gently removed her clothes.

"You know, I really wish I could justify what I'm doing…" I babbled, even if it was just to myself. "But this is wrong. You deserve better from me, especially after what I've already done to you." I shook my head slowly, trying to find the right words and sighing deeply. "But I'm going to go through with it anyway, because I don't have the nerve to… well, to find some other way. Slisko would stick to his principles, I think. I don't think I ever had any. I should have introduced you. He's a little impulsive, he has a big mouth – but he's an okay guy. You'd like him."
I forced myself to stop babbling, and took a deep breath. I picked up the dog tags one more time.

"I guess I'd better just go through with it." I whispered, as I slowly slipped the dog tags over her skull and settled them among the foliage. "Forgive me, Lola."
I looked down at her for a moment. Then, impulsively, I gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.
I gathered her clothes and went down to the shore. After a moment of walking, I found a nice big rock and wrapped it up in her clothing, using her silk stockings to tie the package together.
Then I heaved it all out into the vicious sea as far as I could.

There was just one more thing left to do. I found a pay phone and called the police. I left an anonymous tip that there was something suspicious going on at the lighthouse. I quickly hung up and walked away, losing myself in the dying late-night crowd.
I wandered around town for a few more hours and eventually found myself outside police headquarters. That was probably a stupid place to be, but it was unlikely that Logan would be around at that time of night. I went inside and the officer on duty just nodded to me. I'd been inside often enough to talk to Membrillo over the last few months that I didn't have to explain myself.

I went to the morgue and found Membrillo working on two sprouted souls. One was Lola. I only recognized her because I knew what kind of flowers had sprouted on her.

"Late night at the morgue, isn't it Membrillo?" I asked, although I knew perfectly well he didn't keep 'office hours'.

He looked up at me tiredly. "You know I can't sleep with John Does on the slab, Manny." He droned. The man was dedicated to the point of compulsiveness. He resumed working. "If I don't ID these rose gardens tonight, then I won't be ready for the two that come in tomorrow, and before you know it… I'll be up to my ass in azaleas."

"Don't you ever worry that your job is getting to you, Membrillo?" I asked curiously. It always got to me, seeing him paw through foliage that way. And now that he was feeling around on Lola…

"Well, forensic botany is a trying job, Manny." He said nonchalantly. "But have you ever spent much time here with a florist? In life, they became florists because they loved flowers. But here…" He plucked a small blossom off her rigid body and sniffed it. "A flower is a symbol of pain; of death within death." It was almost as if he knew just how much his words were torturing me. "Their conflicted feelings build and build until, eventually, they become quite mad."

He slowly crushed the flower and let it fall gently to the floor.

"Thanks for the tip." I said, forcing myself to sound as normal as I possibly could. "I guess I'll send you balloon bouquets from now on."

I wondered whether Lola had felt or heard what Membrillo had just done.

He sighed once more, burdened only by his own thoughts, and turned away from Lola to begin feeling around in the vegetation of the other soul.

"Isn't there something shiny on that one?" I said, pointing over to Lola.

Membrillo looked over and shook his head. "I missed that. I must be getting too tired." He freed the dog tags from the entangling leaves and twigs with a sharp snap. "Seaman Anselmo Naranja." He read out. Membrillo gave another deep sigh and placed the tags gently down on the slab before him, picked up his clipboard and started filling out a form. "All day long…" He said dully as he wrote. "I sort through pure sadness. I find evidence, and I piece together stories." The man felt pain. It wasn't the same as mine, but it was still an intense pain. "But none of my stories end well. They all end here, and the moral of every story is the same: we may have years, we may have hours, but sooner or later, we all push up flowers."

Membrillo could use a nice tropical vacation, I thought. And so could I.

"Shouldn't you tell Velasco?" I asked, forcing myself to play the game to its end.

"In the morning." He answered.

"I think I heard him say this guy was missing."

"Don't worry, he won't get away." He replied. Membrillo then looked up at me, suddenly curious. "Did you come here for any special reason, Manny?"

"No. Just passing by."

"I see."

"Well, I'll let you get back to work." I said. Membrillo nodded as I left.

I started to head back to the club once more. About halfway back, I stopped and swore to myself again. I still had something important to take care of.
I looked up towards the top of the cliff. I could just make out the cactus-shaped tower of the club peeking over the edge. I turned myself around and starting walking over to Feline Meadows. It was getting extremely late, but I had to find Nick Virago if I could. I wanted nothing more than to put this day behind me, but Terry the Sea Bee had to come first. I put my hand into the pocket containing Lola's last picture, just to reassure myself it was still there.

I went back into the High Rollers' Lounge. I didn't know if Virago would be there, but that's where Max's office was and Virago was Max's lawyer. It was definitely the best place to start.
Funny thing, I found him right away, sitting at a table in the main lounge over by the plate windows overlooking the track with a careless spread of papers before him.
Luck is a strange, cruel thing.
He looked neat and relaxed, not at all like he had just chased down and sprouted a soul who had been dear to me. I'm not sure just how I expected him to look when I found him; maybe I wanted him to look as awful as I felt. But no, he just looked like Nick Virago, same as ever.
Except now I had a better idea of what he really was.
"Nick Virago!" I exclaimed in mock surprise as I came up to him. "What are *you* doing working in the High Rollers' Lounge? I would think that Maximino's private lawyer would at least have his own office."
"I do." He answered, barely looking up at me. "But they don't serve drinks there."
I sat down at the table across from him. "Got a little lipstick on you there, lover-boy." I needled.
"I already took care of *that*." He sneered, and then looked steadily across the table at me. "And I can do the same to you, Calavera."
I didn't doubt it. But not here, not in front of the staff and all the customers in the lounge. I picked up Virago's expensive drink and leaned back in my chair. He projected a strange, ready-to-pop look, but I was feeling invulnerable at that point. Or maybe I was just past caring.
"Nick," I said, taking a sip, "I need a lawyer. Friend of mine's in the slammer."
"Well, my dance card is full." He answered tartly.
"You'll make time for this." I replied sternly. He huffed at me. "Oh, I think you will. Otherwise I might tell Max about you and Olivia."
"That kind of claim could send a man like Max into quite a rage." Virago said softly in a cold voice. "Especially when the messenger has no proof."
I reached into my pocket and removed the envelope. I slid the photo out just enough so that Virago could see the snapshot. When he went rigid I quickly slipped it back into my pocket.

"What do you want…?" He demanded, sounding furious and worried at the same time.

"I wanna tell you a sad story about a young man unjustly imprisoned merely for speaking his mind. And then you and I are going downtown to spring him. And you can do it Nick, 'cause you're the best."

"When?"

"Now."

He shook his head. "Impossible. What I'm working on now won't wait… and neither will Maximino."

I sent a sly smile towards Virago. "Then Max must still be here. The photo is still here, too. It'd be easy to arrange an introduction, don't you think?"

I pushed back my chair.

"Wait!" Nick blurted out before I could stand up, sounding more than a little panicked. "Okay, I'll go with you. But I'll have to tell Max where I'll be."

We both got up and I began following close behind him.

I grabbed his arm behind his back and shoved him toward the elevator. "You can tell Max afterwards. I'm not letting you out of my sight until our business is done."

Virago growled venomously, but went with me. When we were in the elevator and the doors had closed, I quickly spun around and pinned him to the wall. I had his sprouting gun out of his shoulder holster before he could react.

"Thanks." I said. "I've always wanted one."

He glared at me, but only straightened his clothes.

As we crossed the particularly long bridge between the two islands on our way to the police station – and when there were no people around – I threw the daisy-maker out into the water. Virago heard the faint splash and turned to me in surprise.

"Well…" He hissed softly. "You *are* smart. You hide it well."

"Thanks." I replied. "So do you."

When we finally got to the station, Virago went to work and in almost no time Terry was out on a writ of *habeas corpus*. While Virago worked, I had a few words with Terry about the situation. He was a little confused by what was going on.

"I don't get this, man." He said through the cast-iron bars that separated us. "What gives? What's an upstandin' racketeer like Manny Calavera doin' bustin' a workin'-class slob like *me* outta the can?"

"I hear you're ready to strike against that crooked union." I said. "I'd like to see you get a fair shake. In fact, I've got Alexi and the other cats preppin' the Sea Bees for your release. Logan knows you were about to strike." I lied; at least I think I did. "That's why he put you away on a bogus charge."

Terry buzzed a little. "No, I still don't get it, Calavera. The union's run by the coppers, sure, and you – of all people – should know that the cops are in bed with the gamblin' joints. Help us against the union and you're only hurtin' yourself."

That actually made sense only if I really were a racketeer. In the sense everyone thought I was, that is. I couldn't really tell Terry the truth.

"Hey man, I run an honest joint. We ain't in bed with *nobody*."

Except for the kickbacks to Max, I wouldn't be.

"Yeah, an' what about the protection money?" Terry demanded to know.

That, too.

"We pay every week – on the nose, through the nose – just like every honest place should."

"See what I mean?" He said. "This town's just a big conga line of hustlers, all laughin' and dancin' and scratchin' each other's backs."

Except that Max's boys liked my craps tables so much they probably returned what Max skimmed with interest, so the line was probably more of a circle.

"So…" I said, trying to wrap my skull around things. "If the cops own the union, and the gambling's in bed with the cops…?"

"Yeah, yeah. So who really runs the gamblin', right? Well, no offence, but Maximino is really the big boy in town, obviously. But word is he gets *his* orders from some hardcore gangsters in El Marrow. That fancy cat track is just a big Laundromat… if you get my drift."

He might have something there – just not very much.

"You know what, Terry?" I said stirringly. "You're right. And I think it really stinks. I put a lot of work into that club of mine, and I don't like seeing the money I've worked hard for dribble away into the pockets of these mangy crooks. So if you can hurt 'em, I'm all for it. Because in the long run, what helps *you* helps small-time operators like *me*."

"Yeah?" Terry buzzed a little in surprise. "I guess that *does* make sense."

"There's only one thing I want from you. A little favour."

"Yeah…?" He asked, a little suspiciously.

"My buddy Glottis wants a job on the *Limbo*, but there's a rush and he can't find the tools he needs. Since you boys are gonna strike…?"

Terry snapped his fingers – six of them, at least. "Done. I'll send some tools over to the *Limbo* in Glottis' name first thing. Glad to do it."

"Thanks, *carnal*. I owe you one."

"*Bzzzt!* " He exclaimed. "It's little enough for what you're doin' for me."

When Virago got the writ finalized we left the station with Terry in tow, who immediately flew off toward the docks.

"I guess our business is settled." Nick said, tucking Terry's paperwork into his breast pocket.

"Almost." I said.

Before he could react, I balled up my right fist and send it careening into his jaw with a forceful crack.

"What!?" Nick snarled viciously as he picked himself up. "Was that for the photo girl?" He slowly massaged his jaw.

"No." I replied angrily. "That was just for being you. I don't have time to get you for Lola, but I'm sure somebody will."

"*You* didn't have time to save her, either." He said – a 'punch' much harder than the one I had just landed on him. "But I wouldn't worry about that, Calavera. I hear saving women really isn't your forté."
I didn't say anything – I was too busy fuming with unimaginable rage.
He projected a sly 'grin' and turned to walk away, but paused momentarily to call over his shoulder. "I presume that photo will be taken care of, in a secure way?"
"I'll give it to Glottis." I answered as menacingly as I could. "You can't hurt him, and the 'hornèd beast'," I added, making homage to Olivia's description of him, "wouldn't like it if anything were to happen to me."
Glottis was quite gentle, but I didn't think Virago had much experience with demons. Proving my assumption, he quickly walked away without another word.
I hurried back to the club. The sooner I got that photo to Glottis, the safer I'd feel.

Chapter 28 – From Top to Mop

I didn't sleep at all well the remainder of that night. I spent half the morning tossing around, and the other half dozing lightly only to be woken by dreams about Lola. But I must have fallen into a deep sleep eventually, because I slept right through my alarm and was awoken by the ringing phone. I fumbled groggily with the receiver, dropping it on the floor before getting it right.
"'lo?" I mumbled.
"Manny?" A gruff voice answered. "Velasco."
The phone woke me up so fast I wasn't sure who or where I was, but Velasco's voice brought it all back. I sat up slowly and rubbed my eye sockets, bracing myself to play it out.
"Y'a'? Wha's'a?" I asked blearily.
There was a slight pause, before Velasco went on. "Are you alright, son?"
"I had kind of a late night…" I answered, finally managing clear English.
"Did I wake you up?"
"Yeah."
"Sorry Manny, but this is kinda urgent."
I knew it was, but I still asked. "What is it?"
"I got a call from the city morgue." Velasco said grumpily. "It seems like Naranja's been sprouted."
"*Sprouted!* " I made myself exclaim. "What's happening to this town?"
"Big city crime, Manny." Velasco said with a sigh, giving it a double-meaning… or so I imagined. "We're getting more and more of it every damn day." He gave a longish pause. "I know you probably hate getting it this way, but Naranja's job is yours now."
"I don't know if I'm comfortable taking—"
"You'll take his job because there's no one else I can get on such short notice!" Velasco snapped.

"The *Limbo*'s loading up now an' she'll be ready to sail just after noon. Glottis' tools are all stowed already, so you get that piano player of yours an' your head cleared an' your bony ass down here before they shove off… and you'd better have a union card on you."

"I'll have one."

"Yeah, I figured you would. You've taken care of everything else." He replied. His voice sounded unusually harsh.

"Did you identify Naranja for Membrillo?" I felt I had to ask.

There was another short, but very noticeable pause before Velasco answered deeply. "Yes."

"Well…" I said, feeling like I belonged under a rock. "We'll be there before the *Limbo* sails."

"Yeah, I know you will." Velasco snarled back.

He hung up straight after that.

It was already past ten when Velasco called. I got word to Glottis to meet me at the *Limbo* before noon. The man Salvador was sending to Rubacava to take over the club hadn't arrived yet, of course, but I didn't much care. Calavera Café was no longer any concern of mine. In fact, I no longer felt at home in Rubacava.

I packed what little I thought I needed and sent it to the *Limbo*. Then I rushed down to the bank and made sure I could get at my money further down the line. I almost decided to just turn it all over to Salvador, but I figured it'd be wiser to keep it – I might have still needed it later on. Chasing after Domino and Meché could get quite expensive.

The time was well past eleven when I started to head for the *Limbo*. I had only just gotten to the docks, and spotted Glottis waiting for me ahead, when I heard a siren behind me and the screech of a car breaking suddenly.

I turned around to see Logan getting out of a squad car.

Perfect timing. I turned back towards the *Limbo*'s berth and managed to take only a step forward before Logan called out to me.

"Stay put, Calavera!"

I turned around to watch Logan and his burly driver approach me.

Just then, there was a sharp whistle from somewhere off behind us, and a couple of seconds later a deafening explosion rung through the air. The concussion made us all stumble. I turned toward the sound of the blast and saw a fiery mushroom of debris rising up from the dry docks, its underside brightly lit by flames burning up from the hulks of some incomplete ships.

Logan stared open-jawed while his driver rushed back to the car to shout into the radio.

Before Logan could do anything further, a group of angry Sea Bees suddenly flew up overhead and started pelting both him and the car with fistfuls of rocks, all the while loudly buzzing, "*Sea Bees, Free Bees!!*"

I spun around and sprinted over to the *Limbo*.

"Manny…" Glottis began as I approached.
"Ignore it." I said and yanked his sleeve to get him moving towards the ship.
Velasco was planted in front of the *Limbo*'s gangway, staring over at the dry docks. He let Glottis pass before me, but moved forward to bar my way. Glottis trundled up the gangplank, making it buckle and groan with each step. Up above, the *Limbo*'s deck was crowded with sailors all looking and pointing.
"The Sea Bees are striking." I told Velasco.
"Yeah, I can see that."
"Maybe the *Limbo* ought to shove off now, while we still can." I said, hoping Velasco would get the 'we' part.
"The captain's getting her underway now." He replied. "But first… let's see that union card."
I showed the small plastic card to Velasco, and he shook his head disappointedly. "One of Charlie's rush jobs." He observed and handed it back to me. "Lucky for you, your new captain's far-sighted. Get on board."
"Thanks for the gig." I said, shoving the card back into my pocket. "And for not asking too many questions."
"Hell, after what happened to… Naranja." The pause was too long for comfort. "I can see why you'd leave town. Let's just hope I don't have to go fishin' you out of the drink again."
"I'll stay under next time, I promise."
Velasco looked away, then thumped me on the shoulder.
"Get on board son, or you'll be left behind."
"Right."
I gave him a nod and ran up the gangway.

A few minutes later, the *Limbo* cast off and was pulling away from the docks. The police car, now with a severely cracked windshield, raced up and Logan jumped out. Logan kept gesturing to the *Limbo* while Velasco made helpless gestures. I took one last look at Rubacava, and then went below to report to the captain and start my new job.

Chapter 29 – From Mop to Top

I found that life aboard the *Limbo* took some getting used to. Part of it was that I was no longer the boss of everything. I didn't realize how accustomed I had gotten to being in charge. I mean, one day I was the owner of a swanky nightclub with over a dozen people working for me; and then, literally the next day, I'm at the bottom – the guy taking the orders. It was quite an adjustment to make.
Well, I wasn't *exactly* at the bottom; I had one guy to boss around. At least I didn't have to peel the potatoes myself. But Glottis… Glottis was the chief engineer with a whole staff to give orders to. That took some getting used to as well, and some of the guys had a real problem with a high-ranking demon. At least, until the first mate observed – with sharply-pointed words – that 'that demon' was the one keeping us afloat. That put things in perspective for even the biggest malcontent.

Yet another big adjustment for me was just being on a ship. Most of it was cargo, so there wasn't a lot of space left over for moving around. Being aboard ship was a lot like being in prison: totally confined, and no realistic way out. No wonder sailors went wild when they were on leave.
I got friendly with the ship's radio operator. He had worked in Vegas when he was alive, so we kind of connected – and we sort of cornered the gambling on the boat. Some wise guys started calling the galley 'Calavera Café' until they were persuaded to cut it out. Being dangled over the side by a huge, orange demon can change one's mind about what's funny in quite a hurry. It was just a game to Glottis, because he would never let go – but the guys didn't need to know that.

Anyway, the radio operator and I were eventually good pals, and so I was able to hear news that otherwise I might not have. The Sea Bee strike got to be pretty serious and spread around to other dock workers. I wondered if maybe Alexi had lost control, because wanton destruction wasn't what he was about. An explosion to distract Logan was one thing, but what happened afterwards – if the reactionary newsreels I saw in port were to be believed – was something else. Newspapers I bought when the *Limbo* docked carried pictures of burnt-out warehouses and sunken cargo ships still moored, and I was reminded unwillingly of photos of the USS *Arizona* I had seen as a child… but I recognized anti-union propaganda when saw it.
Another thing I heard, not so easily dismissed, was that my club had been burned to the ground; but that couldn't be linked to the strike. Even with me gone, Logan had gone ahead with the raid and shut the place down. It was empty when it caught fire. It was supposed to have started because the fryer in the kitchen wasn't shut off… but we never had a fryer. High-class joints don't do chips. I didn't care so much for the club, but it cost the LSA a prime source of cash.
It wasn't too long before everyone on board learned that Naranja hadn't been sprouted. It was an inexplicable mistake to everyone but me, and I wasn't going to say a word. The last news I heard from Rubacava was that, after torching the club, Logan had disappeared. He didn't leave town any normal way, and he wasn't found sprouted. He just wasn't there one day. I guess Max had finally made his move. Too bad he didn't make it before the club burned down.
Every shore leave, all I wanted was to just get tight as a drum at the first bar I could find, but I always had work to do. The first thing I always did was to check at the *Nada Mañama* cruise offices to see if Meché had still been on board when the *Lambada* sailed after its stop. She always was.
Then I had to send a wire to Salvador about where I was and where I was heading, and what little information I had learned. I rarely had enough time to get even mildly drunk before having to get back on board.

The *Limbo* crawled along from port to port, unloading and taking on cargo. We weren't moving very fast. Neither was the *Lambada*, but she was making much better time than we were. It wasn't long before she was two ports ahead, then three.
I was able to learn a few things during our longer stops – mostly that Meché never seemed to come ashore. That meant Domino was keeping her on a short leash. What I couldn't figure out was why he was taking her on a luxury cruise in the first place. Salvador didn't know either. Our agent in Puerto Zapato was made aware that the ship carrying Meché was heading his way, and that he should be on the alert; but the *Lambada* was still months away from Zapato, and the Sea of Lament which we were crossing was huge.

There's not much to tell about the journey. One day on board the *Limbo* was a lot like any other, and shore leave was much the same everywhere: check up on the *Lambada* and Meché, send and receive cables, get slightly drunk and be carried back aboard ship by Glottis. Once I wired Carla, but I never got a reply. Just as well, I supposed. The further I got from Rubacava, the more she began to seem like a mistake; but I still cared deeply for her.
Glottis slowly remade the *Limbo* in his image. After rebuilding the old diesel engines into something special, his crew started giving the rest of the ship a complete makeover. Each port saw the ship looking newer and newer; apart from mechanical changes, there was usually some crew turnover at each port. Some souls made careers in the Land of the Dead, others just worked their way across as fast as they could, picking up and dropping one job after another as it suited them. After a while I was one of the older hands on board. In time I got out of the galley and was moved around the ship as different talents were uncovered. About halfway to Puerto Zapato I was posted to the bridge, where I learned how to plot a course and even how to pilot the ship. Then I became the radio operator for a while, and then back on the bridge. Rinse and repeat.

I got a little puzzled after a while about why I was bouncing all over the ship. The captain was a little mysterious about it. Then, at one port about two-thirds of the way to Zapato, the first mate left to take command of another cargo ship.
Imagine my surprise when the captain took me into his quarters and told me *I* was to be his first mate. That explained why my assignment kept changing; he'd come to think I'd make a good replacement, and wanted me to learn the ship from bow-to-stern… and did I ever. But as first mate, I got to know it all even better.
Then came the fateful storm.

It was hurricane season by this time, and we'd been lucky so far in our journey – but not that one day. We were between ports with nowhere to run, and we were tossed around at sea like a toy in a bathtub. When it was over we were listing heavily to starboard with all but one engine out and the captain nowhere to be found. Nobody saw it happen, but he must have been swept overboard. He was probably alright; just a little shaken up somewhere on the seabed. We sent down a few divers, but he was nowhere in sight – not that anyone could go or see very far. The dead can't swim – no buoyancy whatsoever – and the divers, all equipped with air bladders, had to remain tethered to the ship or risk being lost themselves. Searching was a useless, if necessary gesture; but with a little luck the captain should find his way to shore sometime.

In the end, the *Limbo* had to limp on to the next port with me in command. There was an investigation, of course, but the company's panel of inquiry could only conclude that it had been a regrettable accident. They left me in command, but for a while my ship was little more than a heap of scrap metal with propellers. The holds were unloaded and she was put in dry dock for repairs. Those repairs were so extensive that the company gave me the option of rechristening the ship, if I wanted. I did, and so when she was relaunched she hit the water as the SS *Lola*.

Year Three

Chapter 30 – Passing Customs

The *Lambada* was nearly to Puerto Zapato when the *Lola* was relaunched; but Glottis and his crew had really done a number on the engines – and so we flew, in a matter of speaking. We started making ports way ahead of schedule, which pleased the line to no end. We had to extend our stops occasionally because our cargo wasn't ready to be loaded, but even so we began to gain on the *Lambada*'s tail. It wasn't too long before she was just a few ports ahead of us again.

As captain I had the ability to find out things far more easily than I could as a chef, but I had to be even more circumspect. The line would not have been happy to find that they had a member of the LSA in command of one of their ships, and I couldn't risk them finding out and have them strip me of command and put ashore. Not in those days. By this point, I was astonished that Charlie's fake card hadn't yet been noticed. Maybe Velasco was a little more inspective than some of the other officials down the line.
The LSA were getting a reputation as being terrorists. Our own propaganda was being drowned out in the press by official DOD statements and surrogates, especially in the newspapers and on the TV – probably all inspired by Hector LeMans himself, in my opinion. The situation eventually cut me off from the LSA entirely, as it seemed too risky to continue communicating through telegrams or any other conventional means available to me. I had to assume everything – mail, telegrams, radiograms, whatever – was being screened, and even though I'd always operated on the fringes of LSA activities, it was probable that I myself was on the DOD watch lists.

So we sailed on from port to port, taking on and dropping off cargo as it was needed, all the while growing gradually closer to the *Lambada*. She was always a step ahead of us. When the *Lola* was two ports from Puerto Zapato, *Lambada* was already there. That was the end of the line as far as ocean travel was concerned. The *Lambada* would have an extended stopover before heading back to Rubacava, and it would make the return trip with very few passengers. Either Domino took Meché off at Zapato, or they would both be coming back my way.
I still didn't know why Domino had taken her on board the *Lambada* in the first place. If he wanted to sprout her, I assumed he would have done so when he found her. And since both he and Don Copal had stolen her ticket, I didn't think he would bother taking her to the end of the line. I also couldn't see any point in making a round trip. And I *still* didn't know why Domino had made sure I saw him with Meché.

At the port just before Puerto Zapato, we finally crossed the *Lambada*'s path. In fact, she was docked when we arrived. Meché however, was not on the passenger list. Nor was Domino. So, they must have gotten off at Zapato. But why? Where would they go from there? Though I tried not to, I began to wonder if maybe Glottis had been right. Maybe Domino *hadn't* dragged her on board. Maybe they really had been dancing, a couple of lovebirds celebrating their making the next stage of their journey. The idea was absurd, given everything I thought I knew about Domino… but I couldn't help but have doubts.

Finally, nearly a whole year after leaving Rubacava, we reached Puerto Zapato. We sailed into the harbour and a tugboat nudged us into our berth. I was on the bridge, shouting orders and watching the crew scurry around on deck. When we were in position to tie up, Ensign Arnold scrambled up to me. He was pretty new to the ship, and was still always falling over himself trying to please.

"Captain!" He reported anxiously. "Captain Calavera?"

I just puffed on my pipe for a moment (diesel fuel and cigarette butts don't mix, I'd found), before finally taking in the sight.

"Puerto Zapato, sailor! We're here at last!" I shook my head in mute appreciation. "Beautiful port, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir!" Arnold said, highly enthused. Of course, he'd agree with just about anything I said, raw as he was. "Uh, Captain… there are some customs officials down below, sir. They want to search the ship."

That was a little strange, but not unheard of. They usually waited until a ship was securely berthed before coming aboard, but sometimes they boarded from the tugboat just to keep you on your toes.

"Fine, fine." I replied, nudging Arnold playfully with my elbow. "We've got nothing to hide. No skeletons in *our* closet, eh?"

No doubt about it – all this time away from Eva had definitely taken away my edge.

"Yes, *sir!* " Arnold said gamely, then turned to go back below.

I turned my attention to the top deck.

"Secure the bow, boys!" I called out. "Like a rock this time!"

Like I said, there was a lot of turnover on these tramp steamers, and you might be surprised how attracted new hands were to deck furniture when it came to tying up.

I jumped slightly as I felt a rustling of wings swish right past my head. I looked down and saw a pigeon settling itself on the railing next to me. Its head was dropped and the little bird swayed a little as it perched – it was obviously exhausted. There was a message tube attached to one leg. I took the message out of the tube, and the brave little bird heaved itself back into the air, apparently knowing that no reply was needed. I unrolled the little piece of paper and read the cramped writing.

I hope this very urgent message gets to you in time. Our man in Zapato says Miss Colomar never made it to port. It is said that she threw herself overboard at the Pearl. I don't know if you believe that, but whatever you do, DO NOT land at Puerto Zapato! It's a trap. Assassins will attempt to board your ship disguised as customs agents. Beware, Manuel.
And *Viva la Revolución* !

I crumpled up the tiny message and stuffed it into a pocket. I leaned over the railing and shouted to the crew on deck.

"Okay boys, listen up!" Skulls turned toward me as I continued. "We've got some uninvited guests: LSA terrorists!" I barked, as they started exchanging worried looks. "I said *listen!* Preston, you get your ass over to the port authorities and tell them what's going on." Immediately, Preston took off like a flash. "The rest of you, grab whatever you can use as a weapon and get searching! They're disguised as customs officials! Be careful, but *get* them!" They all shot off in various directions.

When the entire crew was gone from sight, I went back inside the cabin and headed down the interior stairwell. At the bottom, I took only a few steps and went sprawling onto the floor.

I twisted myself around to see what had tripped me… and there, before my eyes, was some very nautical-looking shrubbery. I scrambled over and pushed aside the vines and leaves surrounding the skull – it was Ensign Arnold. I stood up slowly, and then saw Deck Officer Glenn enshrouded in greenery beside him.

I shook my head in utter shock. "This can't be happening…" I muttered in a tight voice. I couldn't understand why I was still unsprouted, especially since I had just been outside. Unless maybe the assassins didn't want to show themselves when the bulk of the crew had been on deck.

I clambered down lower and saw yet more of my sprouted crew.

First Lola, and now this…

"Hey!" An unfamiliarly sneering voice called out. "He's back here!"

"Sack 'im!" Another shouted.

I whirled around and ran for my life. They were unfamiliar with the interior of the ship and quickly fell behind, but there were more henchmen onboard than just those two. When I switched corridors and returned to the aft section, I surprised one of the assassins in the crew quarters. He quickly raised his gun to me, but I slammed the hatch shut again before the bullet hit its mark. The Sproutella round pinged off the hard metal as I scrambled down to the next deck.

When I dropped down from the ladder, I found three more men waiting for me. One chuckled deeply as they all casually cocked their guns.

Suddenly, something powerful grabbed me by the collar and jerked me backwards into a small room. Glottis dropped me to the floor, kicked the metal door shut, spun the wheel around and jammed it tight.

We were in the engine room.

The assassins began hammering on the door. The loud clanging and gruff voices lasted for quite a while.

"Don't worry, Cap'n. We're safe in here!" Glottis said triumphantly.

The hammering abruptly stopped, and one of the evil bastards outside mumbled something I didn't quite catch.

"Could you make that out?" I asked Glottis.

Glottis turned a wide-eyed stare at me. "Something about explosives!"

"We've gotta get out of here!" I exclaimed.

"Those guys have guns, Manny!" Glottis whined, sounding panicky. "I don't know if I can keep you from getting hit."

"If they're planting explosives, it means they're leaving. Do you know what'll happen when the explosives go off?"

"Yeah, it'll hurt."

I shook my head. "Those guys are berserk. I saw only sprouted crewmembers on the way here. If this ship goes up while we're still berthed, we won't be the only ones hurting."

"So what'll we do?"

I thought for a brief second, racking my brains. "Okay, *you* can't be sprouted, so I want you to go up on deck and cut us loose. Then get to the bridge as fast as you can. If the tug's still around, get them to help; but either way, we're heading back out."

"But Manny, if the tug's gone…"

"Yeah, I know – it'll be a messy departure. But not as messy as staying here, so *go!* "

Glottis whipped open the hatch and went. I secured it behind him and waited patiently. It wasn't long before the intercom crackled.

"Okay, Cap." Glottis said. "I'm on the bridge and I've cut the lines. The tug's here and they're ready to help us get out."

"Good work, *mano*." I replied. "I'm starting up the engines."

"Manny!" Glottis suddenly exclaimed. "Raise the anchors first, will ya?"

"Oh, right. I'm on it."

I reached over and worked the anchor controls whilst looking out a porthole to see one of them swinging around and bashing violently against the hull.

"You know," I said to the intercom, "these must be the only things on board you haven't chromed."

"Hey, that reminds me of a song!"

"Later." I said firmly.

"Captain!" Glottis crowed after a moment. "Mr. Preston is on the tug. He wants to board."

That was a relief – at least one of my boys survived.

"No way." I answered. "He doesn't need to risk himself."

"I told him about the bomb, Manny." Glottis said. "If he can find it while we're busy getting out of here, maybe we can chuck it overboard."

"Maybe." I said, considering the options. "Okay, he can come aboard, but you tell him not to take any unnecessary risks! I'm not losing anyone else today, got it?"

"Got it, Cap!" Glottis answered briskly.
It seemed like an eternity was passing as we manoeuvred carefully out of the harbour. At any second I expected the explosives to go off.
Finally, we were out in the open sea.
"Manny, the tug's going back." Glottis said. "What do we do now?"
"Hang on." I replied, quickly switching the intercom to general broadcast mode. "Preston! Are you there? Answer me, *mano!* "
"I'm here, Captain." He answered.
"Where are you?"
"Aft cargo hold. I figure they'd put the explosives somewhere near the bottom."
"Makes sense. Carry on. Glottis, point us directly away from the port and tie off the wheel. Then get to the forward hold and start searching. Preston's aft and I'm going amidships."
"I'm on it!" Glottis said.

I grabbed a big wrench from the nearby tool locker (in case any of those thugs were still on board) and left the engine room.
It wasn't long before Glottis' voice came over the intercom again.
"I've found it!" He shouted. "Two charges in the forward hold!"
I jumped to an intercom. "Glottis, if you can pick them up, throw 'em overboard!"
"Can do!"
"Be careful, *carnal*! Preston, you and me are gonna keep looking."
Less than a minute later, the *Lola* got an immense kick in the starboard side. I was thrown to the deck as the boat rolled slightly. After a moment, the ship slowly righted itself as I picked myself up and ran topside.
Once on deck I found Glottis leaning over the starboard rail, looking down at the hull.
"That was pretty close, buddy." I said when I came alongside him.
He looked down at me with a worried look. "Yeah, maybe too close, Manny. I threw 'em out as far as I could, but they went off right after they hit the water."
He turned again to peer down over the side.
"See any damage?" I asked.
"No, but that doesn't mean a thing."
"Well, at least we're still floating." I said. "Let's get to the bridge."

Before we got there we heard Preston's voice over the intercom.
"Glottis? Captain? Anyone there?"
"Yeah." I said, punching the call button. "We're here. You okay?"
"Yes, sir. But the ship isn't."
"Give me a report." I ordered.
"The concussion from the blast must've hit us near an expansion joint. I can't find any obvious damage, but we're taking on water. I've closed the flood control doors around the affected section, but I can't get the pumps working."

Glottis went below to assist, as I spoke into the microphone.
"Understood. Glottis is on his way. Help him get the pumps working and then look for any additional leaks."

While Glottis and Preston worked, I plotted a course out into the ocean. The ship started to dip further and further to starboard. I had a tense twenty minute wait before Glottis finally reported that the pumps were working. We stabilized a little, but didn't lose the right-side inclination.

Chapter 31 – The Pearl

After a short while, Preston came up to the bridge.
"Sir!" He reported. "I've made an inspection of the rest of the hull. There aren't any other leaks that I can find."
"Good job." I said, double-checking our heading.
Preston scanned the horizon. "Uh, sir… I can't see land."
"That's right, sailor. We're headed for the Pearl."
"The Pearl…?" He exclaimed in surprise. I can't say I blamed his sudden disbelief.
'The Pearl', as it was known among sailors, was the urban sea-legend of an enormous pearl so large and bright that no sailor had ever been able to withstand its lustre. Salvador had mentioned something about Meché being there, so that's where we needed to go. I figured that if there existed such an artefact, then we'd be bound to see it somewhere in between the two ports.
"Sir, with all due respect, we need to get back to port." Preston calmly explained. "That blast overstressed the hull, and that's why we're taking on water. Going into deeper water with heavier swells isn't going to help us any."
"We won't be heading back to port any time soon, sailor." I said. "The Pearl is where we need to be."
"Sir…" Preston said, trying to remain calm and reasonable. "That expansion joint is cracking apart. It's only going to get worse. It won't be long before this ship splits in two. Don't forget the *Titanic*."
I looked up at him steadily for a moment before saying anything, recognizing that Preston had in fact been on that ship.
"The *Lola* doesn't matter to us any more." I replied solemnly, hating my own words. "Getting to the Pearl does."
Preston hesitated before speaking again. "Sir… I saw the rest of the crew, I understand. But that's no reason—"
"No, you *don't* understand." I countered. "I'm not out of my mind with guilt or anything. I don't *want* to sink the ship, but it's vital that we get to the Pearl. Hector's goons are still in Zapato waiting for us, so there's no reason to turn back."
"Who's Hector?" He asked, baffled. "And what's waiting for us at the Pearl?"
"Hector's a long story. Let's just say that everything that happened today was directed straight at me. They used Meché to lure me to Zapato, but Meché is supposed to have gone overboard at the Pearl. I don't know what that means, either, but I have to check it out."

Preston didn't respond. At least, not right away. Then, apparently deciding on a new tactic, he went on. "The company's going to take a hell of a beating if the *Lola* goes down with her cargo."

"I know, son. But I stopped working for 'the line' when those DOD bastards boarded us."

"*DOD?*" Preston asked, stunned. "Who *do* you work for?"

"The Lost Souls Alliance." I replied. Preston took a step backwards. "Don't worry, we're not terrorists."

"What about Rubacava?" He asked pointedly.

I shook my head. "*That* was a simple labour dispute. If it got way out of hand, it was only because of how corrupt the maritime union is. The only thing the LSA is concerned with is clearing out the corruption inside the Department of Death. I know that goes against everything you've heard, but you can't go around believing everything you hear. I'm in a better position than anybody to know." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the crumpled message from the carrier pigeon. "Here, check this."

Preston smoothed the paper out and read it. After a moment, he turned to look at me.

"So they weren't LSA terrorists after all…" He said.

"No. The truth was too complicated, but it got everyone motivated."

"And sprouted." Talk about kicking a man when he's down. "So, now what?" Preston asked. "Uh, sir!" He remembered to add.

I shrugged. "Now I go to the Pearl. We'll try to pick up Meché's trail."

"And then?"

"Then I try to save her."

It was well into the evening when I was beginning to give up hope of finding the Pearl anytime soon. I had Preston scanning the sea for the bright light of the Pearl and Glottis was working in the engine room, trying to keep us afloat. I don't think Preston fully believed what I had told him, but he seemed fairly resigned to his situation.

The ship sounded pretty bad by that point, and we were riding dangerously low. The pumps couldn't keep up any more and, making matters worse, waves were breaking over the bow and spilling into the hold. We would have done better if we could have gotten rid of the cargo, but we unfortunately didn't have that luxury. The only one who could be spared from what he was doing was Preston, and there's nothing he could have done alone. In fact, it needed more than three to unload.

It was getting dark when Glottis came up to the bridge.

"Hey, I need you below." I said.

"Sorry Cap, but you haven't heard how the hull is groaning, and I don't want to be trapped down there when it goes."

I wouldn't have wanted that for him either. "Okay, *carnal*." I said sympathetically. "I guess you've done all you can."

"Captain…!" Preston suddenly said, handing me the binoculars and pointing.

I peered through the binoculars, and at first I didn't see a thing.
And then I saw it: a faint glowing aura in the ocean far ahead.
"Just a little further…" I said to myself, feeling an overwhelming rush of hope building up inside me.
However, that same rush of hope was soon swept aside by the deafening screech of rusted metal tearing apart, as the *Lola* began to break down from the stress of the damage to the hull.
She went down faster than any of us could have predicted.
My hand lashed out as I grabbed the railing. Glottis stood tightly beside me.
We both lost sight of Preston after the first few fathoms underwater.

After what seemed like ages – I really didn't know how long exactly – the aft section to which we clung finally landed in the seabed, forcing a huge cloud of sediment to erupt around us. Glottis and I released our grip from the railing, and we slowly settled down near the hulking mass of wreckage.
There was no sign of the bow section of the ship, nor of Preston.
I never saw him again.

By some divine miracle the generators must've been kept inside an air pocket while the ship had sunk, because the *Lola*'s enormous running flood lights were still on, casting a feeble circle of light around the wreck of the aft section.
I picked myself up from the seabed and tried to take stock of the situation.
Glottis was next to me on his hands and knees, making thick gagging noises.
"Manny!" He finally got out. "Choking!!"
"*Mira!*" I exclaimed in annoyance. "Snap out of it, sailor!"
The demon immediately got to his feet, ceasing his gagging and replying in a peeved tone. "Easy for you to say. *You* don't have lungs."
"You lived without your heart once." I pointed out. "So you can do without air for a little while."
"I'm a spirit of the land, Manny." He countered. "Not of the sea!"
"Well, just hang on while I try to figure out what we're gonna do."
I looked up at the wreck of the *Lola* and was suddenly seized with an overwhelmingly black feeling.
"Oh, Lola…" I mumbled thickly. "Looks like I let you down again."
"I told you that name was bad luck…" Glottis grumbled.
"*Hey!*" I snapped.
"Sorry." He said, but with a wry grin on his face.
The demon knew what he was doing; the tactless remark got me back on even keel.

It didn't take me long to analyse the situation. We were at the bottom of the sea next to the torn and half-crushed remains of our ship. Kind of bleak, but there was a little bit of light… specifically, the one off in the distance.
"If the chart was right…" I said mostly to myself. "Then that's *gotta* be the Pearl. But there's a lot of dark water between here and there…"
I took a step forward, wanting to get a better look.

"Beware, brave Captain!" Glottis suddenly howled in a strange, Delphic voice. "Here in the darkest depths of the Sea of Lament dwell the most *horrible* monsters of all! The fearsome, murky *demons of the deep* will *swallow you whole* the instant you leave this *pool of light!* Heed my warning, or take *one step forward* and *learn for yourself!!* "

"Alright, alright!" I snapped impatiently. "I believe you! Just quit it with the creepy spirit-of-the-land voice, huh?" I turned back to look at the ship. "You know, if we're ever gonna get to the Pearl, we'll need some light. Monsters or not, it's pretty dark down here. I wonder if we can salvage anything? Even an underwater welding kit would help."

"Maybe so…" Glottis continued in his normal voice. "But I don't see any light coming from the portholes… just the floodlights outside."

"Yeah, it's so dark we ought to be able to at least see the emergency lights from here, if they were on."

"So how do we find any flashlights or welding kits or whatever?"

"It's kinda funny, you know." I chuckled drearily. "Needing light to find light."

"Heh, yeah." Glottis replied, definitely sarcastic. "I'll tell you an even funnier one – eventually that generator is going to die out, and then there'll be nothing keeping the sea monsters away."

Something caught my eye as Glottis was speaking, and I whirled around to see what it was. There was a little, tiny light swaying around, apparently attached to something scuttling around underneath.

Glottis had seen it too. "Here comes one now!" He exclaimed in fright.

The figure came gradually closer. As it did, the outline became clearer, and it looked more like another soul than a monster of the ocean. A very strange-looking soul, but still a soul nonetheless.

"Okay…" Glottis admitted. "That may not be a sea monster, but it's still pretty spooky."

"*¡Hijole!* " I exclaimed. "He looks like he's been down here a really long time. *Hola, Amigo!* " I called out when the soul was near enough.

"Huh?" He grunted, straightening up some more. Even more or less erect, he was still one weird customer. His bones were all bluish-grey in colour, and strangely velvety-looking. He wore a backpack and the remains of a heavy wet-suit. There were strange bumps and nobs all over his eye sockets, and his small light came from a rusty lantern which hung from a flexible pole that seemed to be growing out of his spine.

"Aw, jeez." He exclaimed in an elderly and haggard voice. "Another shipwreck! You see? That's why I never travel by boat!"

He turned his back and started to move away.

"Hey!" I called out. "We've had a little, um… accident. Think you could help us out?"

He faced us again. "Depends on what kind of help you're lookin' fer."

"Could we tag along with you?"

"Well, it's a long walk you're talkin' about."

"We don't have any other choice." I said with a shrug.

"Oh, alright then." He replied grumpily. "Lift those knees, stick close to my light, and try to sing in key!"
As we moved away from the pool of light, he began to hum merrily to himself. Then, without any sort of warning, he launched into an uplifting rendition of 'This Little Light of Mine'.
The irony wasn't lost on me.
"I'm Manny Calavera." I interrupted when we were well away from the *Lola*'s light. "And he's Glottis. Who're you?"
"The name's Chepito." He answered simply.
"That's it? Just 'Chepito'?"
"Not much use for even one name down here, much less two."
"I see your point." I said. Around this point, I began staring over at what I thought must be the Pearl. We didn't seem to be getting any closer. "Do you think you could take us to the Pearl?"
Chepito stopped suddenly in his tracks, and looked at me suspiciously.
"The *Pearl*?" He exclaimed with an artificial-sounding laugh. "You don't believe them old stories, do ya?" He shook his head. "You actually think that somewhere in this ocean there's a gigantic pearl that shines so brightly it can be seen from passing ships? And that sometimes sailors, so allured by its lustre, actually fling themselves overboard to dive for it… and are never heard from again?"
"Yeah." I replied with a nod. "And I think it's right over—"
"*Bah!* " Chepito exclaimed. "I've been walking this ocean for years, and I ain't *never* seen it!"
"No, really." Glottis said. "The Pearl is right over there." He pointed at the light.
"You poor sucker." Chepito chuckled back with another sad shake of his head. "That's the *moon!* Tell me you didn't come all this way just to pearl-dive the moon?"
He laughed obnoxiously and resumed his walking.
"So why *are* you down here?" I asked curiously.
"Tryin' to get out of the Land of the Dead, same as everybody else."
"But why are you walking?"
He shrugged. "Got sick of waitin' around Rubacava for a boat. Figured I'd make much better time on foot."
I looked around at the dark water. I couldn't see more than few yards around even with the lantern glowing, and not very clearly at that. "How do you know where you're going?" I asked.
"See the moon over there?" He replied without stopping. Glottis and I exchanged worried looks. "I just keep it on my right. That way I know I'm headin' in a straight line."
"Uh…" I began. Not only was it not the moon, it was on our left.
"Oldest trick in the book." Chepito said smugly.
"How long have you been down here…?" I asked, not entirely sure I wanted to know.
"Well, let me put it to you this way." He said after a moment's thought. "I wasn't always this colour."

Just my luck.
I jumped backwards when little red feathery things suddenly flickered out of the lumps around Chepito's eye-sockets and just as suddenly disappeared again.
"Is everything okay with your… eyebrows?" I asked worriedly.
Chepito chuckled again. "Them's barnacles, genius. I don't move fast enough to shake 'em, so they tend to pile up. I don't mind though, since they're the only company I've got." He reached up and tickled the barnacles. "Ain't'cha boys?"
Glottis shot me a sideways look, twirling a forefinger by the side of his head.
"Shouldn't you have hit dry land by now?" I asked.
"I'm tryin' to cross a pretty big ocean here, sonny." Chepito snapped irritably. "What do *you* know about it?"
"I've already done it. In a boat."
"We had such a nice boat!" Glottis added.
"*Don't talk to me about boats!!* " Chepito snarled angrily.
"Let me guess…" I sighed. "You died in a shipwreck."
"A shipwreck would've been better than what happened to us!" He declared, his stride turning into a stomp. "Led off-course by bad equipment, lost for weeks – no food, no shelter from the sun! We started throwing the dead overboard… but then the sharks began following the boat."
"What happened then?" Glottis asked, apparently fascinated.
"What happened was I learned three very valuable lessons." He ticked them off on his fingers. "Stay away from boats. When it comes to navigation, trust only the moon and the stars, and when there's only two of you left… never *ever* go to sleep."
Nobody said anything for a couple of minutes after that.

Eventually, I asked another question to break the silence. "How have you kept that light going all this time?"
"Well, I found this coral…" Chepito answered. "This bizarre glow-in-the-dark coral. Damnedest thing! Shines like a lightening bug and never seems to wear out!"
I suddenly recalled the glowing trophy on Domino's desk.
"I saw some of that once." I said nostalgically.
"I don't think so, 'cause I don't think you've been to the place where I got it."
"Where'd you get it?"
"Edge of the world, boy. Only place it grows."
I was beginning to get fed up with Chepito's smug attitude.
"You know…" I said after another long pause. "I'm pretty sure that's not the moon."
"Bah!" Chepito huffed.
"Does it ever set?" I went on. "When's the last time you saw the sun?"
"The sea plays tricks on your mind, sonny. Get used to it."
I sighed impatiently and motioned to Glottis, who promptly grabbed Chepito by the lantern pole and lifted him up off the seafloor.

"Hey, lay off!" Chepito exclaimed, thrashing his limbs. "Get yer own damn lamp! Leggo, leggo, *leggo!* "

"C'mon, Glottis." I said, turning towards the distant light.

"Where are you taking me?" Chepito demanded.

"To the moon." I answered sarcastically.

It took us far longer to get there than I had expected. Maybe the sea didn't play the kind of tricks Chepito thought it did, but it was difficult to judge distances. Still, the light from the Pearl slowly grew larger until eventually we topped a rise in the seabed overlooking the deep hollow it sat in.
Across from where we stood was a large half-shell pedestal with the gargantuan Pearl resting inside – it was possibly the most dazzling sight I'd ever seen. Still, I couldn't be sure, but it looked kind of fake. I mean, how could a pearl – however big it was – shine like that at the bottom of the ocean? And yet… the Land of the Dead was a very strange place.

"*The Pearl!* " Chepito exclaimed with overt glee. "I *knew* I'd find her someday! I'm rich! Rich, rich, *riii*—"
I swung over and clamped Chepito's jaw shut with my hand.

"*Shhh!* " I hissed at him. "Something's wrong, listen!"
We all fell immediately silent and heard a faint, warbling cry. It grew progressively louder, eventually turning into watery screams of terror. We looked up to where the noise was coming from, and saw several small shapes falling towards the Pearl – a group of souls flailing their limbs around in a futile effort to swim.

"Manny…" Glottis whispered, sounding very worried. "What's going on?"
I had no answer, and just shook my head silently.

When the souls got close enough to the Pearl that they were brightly lit by its glowing aura, an immense shape suddenly darted out from beneath the shelf that held the Pearl. It rocketed towards the falling souls, reaching out with eight giant arms to scoop them up. The colossal demon octopus then turned around and slid back into the dark hollow. Back in the murky shadows underneath the Pearl, the octopus thrust the wriggling souls into some sort of odd metal contraption that looked like a submarine – but it was difficult to judge just what lay there in the shadows.

"Manny…" Glottis whimpered, peering intently into the hollow. "I think that octopus is looking right at us!"
I couldn't see anything except a sub-like blur. "How can you tell?"

"Maybe I have better eyesight down here than you."

"Yeah…" I said, slowly figuring things out. "Do you suppose this is what happened to Meché?"
Glottis shrugged his large shoulders but didn't say anything.
Chepito leaned forward like a dog straining on its leash. "Oh, if only that thing would just go away, I could get that Pearl!"
When Chepito began moving around, I saw the shadow under the Pearl shift somewhat.

"It's attracted to light." I said to Glottis.

"Uh-huh." He agreed.

"Take a swim, Cheppie." I taunted. "You're attracting too much attention to us."

"Too bad." He sneered. "That Pearl is *mine*."

"Okay." I said simply, gesturing for Glottis to follow me as I started walking around the rim of the hollow. "You know… if we can find out where that monster is taking those people, we might find Meché there."

"Yeah…" He replied gingerly. "But how does this figure into the stolen Double-N tickets and everything?"

"You've been thinking about that too, huh? I really don't know for sure, *carnal*. I've got a feeling there's more to this scam than anyone suspected."

"Uh, Manny…" Glottis said urgently. He pointed behind us.

I turned around, and there was Chepito.

"Don't even *think* about sneaking off with my Pearl!" He declared.

I sighed wearily. "Look, *mano*. If you can fit that cue ball into your pocket, it's all yours. I've got bigger things to worry about, so give us some space."

"*Hah!* " Was all he said.

"Maybe we should just throw him in." Glottis whispered to me.

I looked at Glottis is surprise. "Hey! We don't know what really happens to those people!"

"Oh, yeah." He replied sheepishly. "Good point."

I turned back to Chepito. "I'm trying to be reasonable, but you're not making it easy." I said warningly, taking a step forward. "You've got to listen—"

Chepito took a step back, then suddenly cried out and fell backwards…

…but didn't go down all the way. He thrashed his arms and jerked his body viciously about, but seemed strangely rooted to that one spot.

"I'm stuck!!" He shouted.

I looked down over the ridge and saw that he had one foot wedged tightly into a little crevice.

"Manny!" Glottis exclaimed just as I saw movement down in the hollow.

The demon octopus was on the move.

Glottis and I looked at each other momentarily, before throwing ourselves over the edge too.

"Hey!" Chepito screamed as we tumbled down. "You can't leave me here all alone!"

We hit the bottom of the hollow as the giant octopus shot past overhead.

Glottis picked me up under his arm and quickly swam under the overhang.

It *was* a submarine under there.

The octopus returned to the shadows with a still-screaming Chepito in one arm. It thrust him viciously into the sub and then climbed inside itself.

"I guess it didn't notice us." Glottis said.

We climbed up onto the metal sub and held on tight as the screws started to spin silently. The sub rose up with a bone-rattling roar and sailed out of the hollow with ease.

"Looks like we're heading south!" I shouted through the rushing water.
"But there isn't anything on the southern edge of the world!" Glottis shouted back. "Except…"
"…The Edge!" We finished together.

Chapter 32 – The Edge of the World

The roaring sub travelled quickly through the freezing, dark water for several hours before we came to a rising shelf of rock. The water became rapidly brighter, with sunlight penetrating the shallower water and another kind of ominous light coming from ahead of us. The other light grew steadily in strength until we finally peaked the ridge, and showed itself to be a huge, fluorescing coral reef. The submarine threaded its way past the reef and sailed into the water beyond. On the other side of the reef, the seabed rose even higher into a series of small 'foothills' leading to an island up above.

As the sub rushed past the reef we looked down below us and saw, near particularly bright regions of coral, various clusters of souls apparently mining the luminescent sea-rock.
"Well," I said to Glottis, "at least the octopus doesn't eat them."
"Yeah." He replied. "But maybe we should get off now before we become part of the chain gang."
"Good idea."
We pushed away from the sub and were swept down to the seafloor in its turbulent wake.

We settled to the bottom as the octopus sped away. We approached the base of the island, which was near some very industrial-looking structures rooted into the seabed.
"Manny…?" Glottis began.
"Don't ask, *carnal*." I said. "'Cause I don't know."
I glanced around to make sure that the coast was clear, and then started walking cautiously toward the structures.
"Is this a good idea, Manny?" Glottis asked shakily.
"We've come this far, we can't turn back now." I replied, trying to sound brave. "Besides, we don't really know where we are. The only way we're going to get out of here is to go through."
Glottis peered around apprehensively.
I looked too, but couldn't see anything.
"Any sign of that octopus?" I asked.
"No, but I can smell him."

We finally got to the structures: mostly huge supports for something that could be seen indistinctly above the water's surface. One thing that stood out on the sea floor was an elevator shaft.
I pointed it out to Glottis.

"I'm going to go up and see what I can find. Do you think you could watch the exit down here?"

"I think so, Manny."

"You gonna be okay, *mano*? Or do you need to get some air?"

Glottis shrugged. "Maybe I've got gills somewhere."

"Okay, I'm gonna go see if I can find Meché."

"But what happens if that octopus comes back?" Glottis whined.

"Poke him in the eye and steal his sub!" I joked.

Glottis thought I was serious. "Heh, stupid octopus."

I took the shaky elevator way up to a platform that extended from the small island to out over the sea. Nice view, if a little bleak. I followed the steel catwalk to a complex of buildings situated on the island. The whole thing looked like some kind of factory compound. At a glance, it seemed deserted; and second impressions didn't contradict my first. The buildings were badly weathered by the ocean air, and piles of garbage – such as crumpled-up papers and Styrofoam cups – were scattered everywhere. There were also a lot of broken windows.

As I got closer to the largest building I could clearly see signs of repair. It sat right at the edge of the island, almost opposite from where Glottis and I had dropped off the sub, and I noticed huge conveyor belts lifting glowing hunks of coral out of the sea and into the building itself. This must be the actual factory, I thought.

I found an unlocked door and quietly entered. There was nobody in sight, but I could hear a heavy clunking sound from far off. I followed the loud noises and discovered the place where the conveyor belts took the coral. A large number of haggard-looking souls were collecting the coral into things that looked like miniature mining carts and pushing them to some other place I couldn't quite see. I wasn't interested in the coral and I wasn't ready to be seen, so I ducked out and went looking for a way to get to the upper floors. After a little searching I found some offices at the very top of the structure overlooking the roaring ocean below. Most of the offices were either deserted or locked.

I found a cheap deck of cards in one. I swiped it up – never know when there could be a solitaire emergency. It was a little frayed around the edges, but then again so was I. And I had fewer suits.

The main office suite looked like it was still occupied, even though there was no one in the outer office when I entered. However, there were fresh papers on the secretary's desk and a smouldering cigarette butt in the elaborate bronze ashtray.

I went into the inner office – it was very impressive. Lots of space, a massive desk, and enormous windows looking out over the sea. Nobody was sitting behind the desk, but a woman was busy piling some papers onto it. She turned to stare out a window.

I got just enough profile to know that I had finally found her.

"Meché…" I said softly as I approached her.
She jumped and whirled around.
"Manny!" She exclaimed in disbelief. One hand came up to cover her open jaw. "What… what are you *doing* here?"
"I wanted to see how your trip was going, angel." I answered, feeling a little giddy. "I *am* your travel agent, you know." I was floating, emotionally, as though sleeping or stone drunk. "By the way, thanks for that bottle of champagne you sent me." I tapped the little crack it had made in my skull. "It really hit the spot."
I was making a joke, but Meché replied in a heavily serious tone.
"You were headed for a trap. I was trying to warn you! Domino was using me like bait." She tossed the papers she still had in her hands onto the desk in a careless heap. She turned away and took a step or two away from me before continuing. "I didn't want you to end up a prisoner here like me."
I was confused, and felt a brief flash of anger. She had knocked my lights out as a *warning*? The bait part sort of made sense, but… "Prisoner?" I asked incredulously, grabbing her arm and pulling her back towards me. "Where's your cell?" I asked, thrusting my face into hers, almost snarling the words at her. "Or are you just sharing a bunk with the warden?"
That was a mistake, letting my mouth get ahead of me like that… and I knew it the instant Meché's hand cracked across my face.
"If THAT'S what you think of me," she answered hotly, yanking herself out of my grasp, "then why did you come here?"
Meché didn't wait for an answer. She turned away and quickly stalked toward the door.
Before she could get there however, Domino strode through – as big as death and wearing a burnt-orange leisure suit with a gaudy tie like something from Jackson Pollock's garbage. Big, mirrored sunglasses hid the empty black pits of his eye sockets.
"Because this is where he belongs!" Domino answered. "Here, working for me."
I don't know what startled me more – that I was actually face-to-face with my nemesis again, or that he was strolling around a half-deserted factory island on the edge of the world looking like a Miami Beach lounge lizard.
Domino grinned smugly at me. "I knew you'd come round eventually." He said, peering down at me over his shades. "Because, right or wrong, Manuel Calavera is *always* on the winning team."
Meché just stood silently by the door, her hands clasped in front of her.
I shook my head slowly. I didn't know what his act was about, but I wasn't going to play along.
"I'm getting off this rock." I said defiantly. "And I'm taking all of these people with me."
Domino laughed heartily, almost perversely. "Manny, there's no way off this island! I'm afraid you're stuck here in my little executive training program."

He took off his shades, tossing them onto the top of his desk as he sat down in his black-leather executive chair and putting his feet up with his hands behind his skull.
"See, I need you to take my place here, kid." He went on. "I've got to get back to the city, where the action is."
Domino projected a big, satisfied grin.

Before I could say anything, Glottis came blundering in. I made discreet shooing motions, but instead of turning around and running like hell, he just looked at me.
"Sorry, Manny." He said absently. "But I had to come in! My skin was getting all pruney."
"Him, I *don't* need…" Domino said, reaching down and pressing something under his desk.
Glottis only made it one more step forward before the floor beneath his feet dropped away. He fell with a frightened scream.
There was an enormous splash, and a few seconds later I could see him out the window – still screaming – being carried away by the vicious current over the edge of the world.

If I still had blood and eyes, I would have seen red.
"I'm gonna grind you into powder for that, *cabrón*." I snarled as I advanced on Domino.
"Maybe later." He replied casually, as he sprang to his feet.

The next thing I remember was Domino's fist hurtling toward me, and the whole world going black.

Chapter 33 – Los Angelitos

When I came to, I was sitting slumped at a small desk in a dark room.
I pulled myself more-or-less upright in the chair and massaged my skull.
I shook my head in an attempt to clear it.
"Careful, Bibi…" A tiny, yet gravely voice squeaked. "The new boss is waking up."
I turned toward the voice and saw just about the saddest thing I'd ever seen… alive *or* dead.
There, in the middle of the office I found myself in, was a large birdcage which held two small children. Inside the cage with them were small chunks of coral in a bowl, tools, and some other things I couldn't make sense of right away.
It was a little sweatshop.
I stood up and managed to walk over to the cage. The kids sat on two small perches, focusing on their work. Their little wings were drooping.
"*Hola, angelitos*." I said with a trace of slur. Domino packed quite a wallop.

"I'll bite ya!" One of the kids – a boy – announced fiercely. "I swear to God!"

"Please don't bite anyone else, Pugsy." The other – a girl – pleaded with a small voice. "That's why they put us in the cage in the first place!"

The first one, Pugsy, just glared at me. The other, who had to be Bibi, looked scared.

A great couple of days I was having. First my crew gets sprouted, my ship sinks, Glottis is killed (by a cliché, of all things), Domino knocks my lights out, and *now* a little cherub boy wants to bite me. I would have laughed if it wasn't all so sad.

"Why do you want to bite me?" I asked of Pugsy.

"You're the mean new boss." He answered.

"Mr. Hurley said you were meaner than him!" Bibi added.

"He said you had a Bone-saw…" Pugsy said with a tremor in his voice.

"Well…" I said, calmly. "You really shouldn't believe everything Domino tells you. My name's Manny Calavera, by the way. You're Pugsy and… Bibi, right?"

"Mr. Hurley told us about you." Pugsy replied guardedly. "You're the one who tricked Meché!"

I sighed a little.

"Poor Meché…" Bibi said sadly.

"I never tricked anybody." I told them. "Meché is my friend."

"She talked about you before." Pugsy went on.

At least they don't get ALL their information from Domino.

"Every time she says your name, she looks so sad…" Bibi said.

"I don't know what you did to her…" Pugsy growled. "But you're gonna be sorry!"

I sighed again, more heavily than before. "I've been sorry for almost three years." The two kids exchanged confused glances. "I didn't *trick* Meché, but I *did* hurt her… and I'm trying to make up for it."

"You're a bad man!" Bibi declared with the absolute righteousness of a child.

"I'm not gonna argue with you about that." I replied sadly. The little girl looked even more confused. "Do you kids know why you're here?"

"Making light bulbs." Bibi said. "What does it look like?"

"No, I mean why are you *here*, in *this* place?" I corrected.

"We're dead." Pugsy answered.

"Mr. Hurley said this is where people go when they die." Bibi added.

"Okay, but has Meché ever said anything different?" I asked. They didn't answer straight away, but they flinched somewhat. "Then I guess she has, and Domino doesn't want you talking about it." They both looked to the office's open door, making sure no one was there, and then nodded. "So maybe you can't trust everything Domino says. I can't give you a solid reason to trust me straight away, but you *can* trust me. This place isn't where you're supposed to be and I'm going to do my level best to get you out of here."

"What?" Bibi exclaimed, as if this was a bad thing.

"You can't do that!" Pugsy insisted. "We have to stay here and take care of Meché!"

"She'd be so sad here all alone." Bibi remarked. "Sometimes we hear her crying, you know."

"I'm going to get us *all* out of here. You, Meché, *everyone*."

"How're you gonna do that?" Pugsy demanded. "Mr. Hurley says there's no way off the island."

"Look, will you stop throwing Domino in my face?" I snapped finally. "I got enough of that from Copal!" The *angelitos* looked terribly frightened. Bad move by me. "I'm sorry…" I quickly said. "Domino's kind of a sore subject with me. You carry on with your light bulbs while I go find out a few things."

I made my way back to Domino's office suite, rubbing my head along the way.
This time, Meché was working in the outer office.

"Oh, look!" She exclaimed sarcastically as I walked in. "It's my Prince Charming! Did you come back here to insult me some more, or do you just want some ice for your head?"
Well, I deserved that. I still don't know why I made that crack about sharing a bunk. I couldn't explain it to myself, so there was absolutely no point trying to explain it away to Meché.
Instead of being apologetic, I went on angrily. "Why are those children locked up in a cage?"
She looked off-balance. I guessed that was the last thing she expected me to say, but answered matter-of-factly. "With the wings those kids have, they're the only things on this island that Domino can't control."

"Hey!" I said excitedly. "If the kids can fly—"

"They can't fly *that* far, Manny." She cut me off. "But they *can* fly circles around Domino… and they can bite pretty hard, too."
She clamped a hand over her jaw to muffle the laughter, casting a worried glance at the inner door.
It was a funny picture, but I suddenly felt dizzy. I quickly found a chair and sat down, massaging my skull.

"You know…" I said thoughtfully. "I think Domino might've hit me right where *you* clobbered me before. So while we're on the subject of true confessions, just why DID you take me out with that champagne bottle, anyway?"
Meché got a lip-bitingly guilty look. "I told you, to stop you from falling into Domino's trap. If you had made it onto that ship, you would have ended up—"

"—here?" I finished her sentence.

"Yes." She replied quietly.

"Worked like a charm." I said dryly. She looked away from me. In case shame was involved, I decided to be gentle. "Has Domino… *hurt* you in any way?"

"Not as much as I've hurt him." She answered, thankfully sounding as if she hadn't experienced what I was aiming at. "Boy, can that guy take a punch!"

I sighed again, thankfully; supposing I was reading her correctly. Either way, it was time to get to the point.

"Look, Meché…" I started, taking a deep breath. "I think we need to talk."

"Start talking." She sounded sarcastic. "You're the salesman."

Where to start?

"I have a lot of explaining to do." I said, trying to give myself time to get my head together.

"Save your breath." Meché snapped. "Domino's explained it all to me already."

I shook my head angrily. "Yeah, and Domino's 'explained' everything to those poor kids. What gives? Is Domino the only trustworthy guy in the world?"

I didn't expect an answer, and didn't get one.

"Well, whatever." I went on. "We're getting out of here."

I stood up a little too quickly.

"*Still* trying to steal my commission from Domino?" Meché asked, sounding amazed. "Manny, don't you *ever* give up?"

"I'm not after any commission!" I protested, still very annoyed. "I just want to get us both out of here!"

"Then why don't you just ask your boss for the day off?" She needled.

"I can't believe you think he's my boss." I replied sadly. "He's my arch-enemy!"

"*I* think he's your boss, *you* think he's my boyfriend." She said harshly. "We don't seem to have a good foundation of trust in our relationship, do we?"

I guess we really didn't, at that.

"Look, I'm sorry I implied he was your boyfriend. I *do* trust you."

"Well, I'm not so sure I trust *you* about anything. But I'll tell you one thing that would convince me…"

That seemed more like it.

"Name it." I said.

"Give me your gun."

"*What?!* " I exclaimed in total disbelief. "What makes you think I have a gun?"

"You work for the most heavily-armed organization in the Land of the Dead!" Meché snapped angrily.

This was unbelievable. Where did she get this crap? Of course: from Domino.

"I *don't* work for the most heavily-armed organization *anywhere!* " I practically yelled.

"You know, you're right." She said sarcastically. "There are rumours of a revolutionary army stockpiling heavy weapons."

"Actually, them I work for." I admitted.

A split-second later I wanted to take that back. If that little piece of intel ever got back to Domino, I'd be sunk.

"Manny…" she said dismissively, relieving me of that worry. "Why don't you come back when you're willing to deal straight with me, okay?"

Maybe not a bad idea. I turned to go into Domino's office.

"Sir!" She called in a prim secretary voice. "Do you have an appointment?"

I just gave her a look. "I don't need one. It's time for a little corporate restructuring."

Chapter 24 – Domino Talks

Domino was seated behind his desk with his feet up again, smoking a cigar and nodding his head in an autistic-looking way. I almost started laughing, but then I noticed he was using one of those little portable stereos that punk kids started wearing towards the end of my life. I always thought they were just wrapped up in their own sad little worlds.
Just the thing for Domino.

"Domino!" I called out.
Nod, nod, nod.
I stuck my face into his and shouted. "*DOMINO!*"
He didn't jump. Obviously he knew I was there from the first. He took off his headset and drawled at me. "Takin' your first coffee break, Calavera?"
"We've got a score to settle, *esé*." I snapped.
Domino sighed. "You know, if I ever spoke to *my* boss, Hector, that way…"
He trailed off with a slow shake of his head.
I wasn't going to play that game. "You killed my best friend!" I accused.
"The demon?" He asked incredulously. "Manny…" He went on in an exaggerated 'lets-be-reasonable' tone. "You can use a demon as a driver, let him carry your messages, let him serve you food, but you can't *ever* start thinking of them as friends. It's just not natural!"
So he wasn't going to play that game, either. Fine – I wanted some answers about the setup. I figured they'd be easier to get by with playing dumb, the way Domino was trying to play me.
"What are you doing out here on the edge of the world?" I asked.
"Oh, I know." He said, projecting a wry smile. "I ask myself that question every day. But I'm going to train you, Manny. Train you to take my place here running this two-bit light bulb factory."
I wasn't sure I heard that right; it was too small-time. "You and Hector set up a secret hideout here to make… light bulbs?"
"Oh no, that's just a side benefit." Domino answered with a chuckle. "No, the real purpose here is to have a place where we can lock up all these old clients of mine. Can't have 'good' people wandering loose in the Land of the Dead and telling everybody how we stole their Double-N tickets, now can we?"
He 'smiled' broadly.
I was so surprised to hear such a blatant admission that I blurted out.
"You stole *all* these people's tickets?"
Well, there was the answer to why Salvador never heard any rumours of saints walking through the Land of the Dead: they were all on this island.
Too bad I couldn't make a report about it.
Domino seemed to mistake my superficial reaction for sincere confusion.
"Okay, Calavera…" He sighed. "How much of this haven't you figured out?"
If he was going to make a full confession, I'd play along.

I gave him a baffled look. He shook his head at me and went on patiently.

"Copal would route all the good clients to me after he switched over their tickets to a secret holding fund. I'd cover up the paper trail, and we'd make sure that the pigeon 'jumped overboard' at the Pearl." Domino laughed.

It was all just a good scam to him.

Well, that was all pretty much what Salvador had figured out, except for the part about the Pearl… and that was no longer news to me. There had to be more to justify such an elaborate operation.

"I knew it!" I exclaimed. "I *knew* you were getting all the good clients!"

"I handled them all." He admitted smugly. "Except for Mercedes, who *you* hijacked away from me in that ridiculous hot rod." He gave another slow shake of his head. "I tell you, Manny… hot rods like that just don't look safe to me."

He clearly didn't know what he was talking about, especially since 'hot rod' is hep rather than hip.

"So it *wasn't* my fault Meché didn't get a ticket…" I said as indignantly as I could. "You stole it!"

But it was still my fault she was in this fix.

"Well, it's *your* fault she ended up in the forest," Domino retorted, as if he was reading my mind, "instead of coming here right away. But… I fixed that."

"I'm taking Meché out of this dungeon." I growled.

"Manny, before I found her, she spent a *year* out there in the Petrified Forest *alone* because of you!" He said, very seriously.

That was bad… very bad. But not exactly news.

"By comparison…" He went on. "I'd say that I'm keeping her pretty comfortable here in my 'dungeon', wouldn't you?"

I'd say he was rationalizing. But I needed information a lot more than I needed to take pot shots. I folded my arms before going on.

"One ticket for you. One for Hector. How many more do you need?"

"Oh, Manny!" Domino said, sounding a little exasperated. "We never touch the product *ourselves!* We sell the tickets off to unfortunate souls who were unable to lead 'moral' lives because of the crippling amounts of cash they were born into!"

I could almost see the quotes he put around 'moral'. It was nice to have it straight from the jackass' mouth, but I still wasn't hearing anything entirely new.

"But you could just take the tickets and leave today." I pointed out.

"We found a way to make the Land of the Dead *liveable!* " He chuckled arrogantly.

Was he kidding? I sure didn't think so.

"Why would we want to leave?" He asked. That was definitely a 'baby, if you have to ask' kind of question.

Domino was talking pretty freely, but there had to be more to the game than what he was saying… and maybe more than he even knew about. That suitcase Maximino and Charlie had been playing games with just didn't fit, not in Domino's version of things.

I realized then that Domino wasn't exactly the big boy he thought he was. Domino probably only knew enough to play his part.
"Well…" I said, backing towards the door. "I gotta get back to trying to escape."
Domino laughed dismissively at me. "Hey, you do that kid. Go knock yourself out!"
He put his little stereo headset back on as I left.

After a few wrong turns, I eventually made my way back to the office where I had woken up after Domino tucked me in.
"Hello, Mr. Mean Boss Guy." Pugsy taunted.
"Would one of you children happen to have a gun?" I asked.
No harm in asking, and maybe they had a convincing toy gun. Giving that to Meché might make her see how ridiculous she was being.
"Yeah, we do." Pugsy said. "So stick 'em up!"
I put my hands up.
"He doesn't have one." Bibi whispered to me, being too young to know playful sarcasm when she found it. "He's such a liar."
"Oh, yeah?" Pugsy said, turning to her. "Well, you're stupid!"
"Your light bulbs don't work!" Bibi retorted.
"Your light bulbs smell light boogers!" Pugsy shot back.
"Ha, ha!" Bibi taunted. "No one thinks you're funny anymore."
"Oh, yeah?" Pugsy returned, floundering slightly. "Well, everybody in this cage is smarter than you!"
"Everybody except for *you*."
Man, this was really taking me back.
"That's because I'm *especially* smarter than you!"
"In your dreams!" Bibi said with a toss of her head.
"In your baby bed that's wet 'cause you wet in it?"
Score.
"*Shut up!* " Bibi shouted.
"Bed-wetter!"
"*I said*, *shut up!!* "
It was time to put a stop to this. "Hey!" I said sharply. "No fighting, no biting!"
That got them arguing over who started it.
"Don't make me come in there." I warned.
Then they started laughing. That was good; maybe I could turn it up a notch.
"You're two *bad* little children." I said. They roared with laughter. "I'm *glad* you're in a cage."
Bibi fell off her perch, but didn't stop laughing.

After they wore themselves out and settled down, I went on in a calmer tone.
"Maybe one of you little *diablos* has a toy gun?"
"We're not allowed to have toys." Pugsy said sadly.
"You're kidding me!" I exclaimed.
"We have to work *all-day-long*." Bibi said with a sniff.

"Well, since I'm the new boss, I say you can play for a while." I held out the deck of cards I'd found. "Know any card games?"

"Old Maid!" Pugsy shouted.

"Poker!" Bibi countered.

Poker!?

"Well, you two can figure it out. I've got an escape plan to work on. Be back in a little while."

I went for a walk. I needed to know the layout of the place better if I was going to get out of it. I didn't have an actual escape plan, but I was hoping inspiration would strike if I could find something useful.

I'd pretty much covered the main factory compound and was about to head out to look over the offshore stuff I'd ignored on the way in, when I ran straight into Domino.

"Taking the nickel tour, eh Manny?" He asked.

"Something like that, Dommy." I answered.

"Looks like you're heading for the crane."

"Is that what it is?"

"Sure is. Come on, I think you'd benefit from a guide."

I shrugged. "If you say so."

He led me up to the catwalk and we headed for the crane.

I looked back inland, gazing over the view. "Nice island you've got here."

For a forsaken, barren lump of rock, anyway.

"Yeah, the previous owners didn't know what they had here. Let us pick it up for a song."

I winced painfully, thinking of Glottis and his piano – and both of them were gone.

"They scooped out all the coral they could reach with this crane and then abandoned the plant. But we knew we had what it would take to go the extra distance to the big reef." Domino expressed proudly.

"Are you going to lecture me about the 'winning attitude' again?" I growled.

"No way!" He exclaimed. "Slave labour, Manny! That's the *real* ticket to success."

"And you expect me to go along with this?" I asked. Was he really that delusional?

Domino suddenly stopped walking and faced me directly.

"Manny, I have all the guns." He said in a low, solemn tone. "I have all the transportation, and I have all the brains. What are *you* gonna do?"

"I'm NOT going to work for you."

He shrugged carelessly. "Well, there's not much to do on this island if you don't work, take it from me. And think about it… once I'm gone, it'll be just you and Meché alone on this deserted island. Don't tell me that prospect doesn't appeal to you…?"

His implication sickened me. "Why don't you just sprout me like you tried to do at Puerto Zapato?" I asked, letting my anger get the better of me again. For all I knew, he was looking for any excuse to do just that.

"That wasn't *me*." He protested, sounding almost sincerely earnest. "That was Hector. He's so unimaginative! Just wants to tie up the loose ends, you know? But I believe, however, that you can be rehabilitated through honest work."

"What do you know about *honest* anything?" I sneered.

"You just don't want to get it, do you, Manny?" He chided with a hefty shrug. "Well, this is what I really brought you out here for…"

He reached into his breast pocket. I held my ground, bracing myself for the sprouter despite what he had just said.

But instead of a gun, he pulled out the deck of cards I had given to the children.

He tossed it over the railing, into the sea below.

"*I'm* the boss here, Manny. Don't you ever forget that."

He turned and walked back to the shore.

Chapter 34 – Another Shipwreck

I stayed on the catwalk for a while, fuming with rage.

I'm not sure what bothered me more – Domino's compulsive need to act like a big man, or that he had to spoil the kids' fun to do it. I guess he was the sort of person that just had to dominate; no wonder I hated the guy.

I was stewing up there for a long time. Dusk came down and I saw the souls emerge from the sea and trudge towards the compound.

I muttered angrily to myself when I saw this, as if intoning a spell.

"If only Alexi were here, then I could *really* start some trouble…" I snarled, giving the catwalk a hard kick.

I suddenly spotted someone familiar moving along the beach and learned forward to get a better view. Actually, from where I was standing, they all looked alike… but how many souls in the Land of the Dead glow in the dark?

I sprinted down to the beach and lost sight of him, but it was getting darker now and that only made it easier to pick him up again.

"Chepito!" I called out.

"Huh? Who?" He exclaimed, peering around. When he spotted me, he grimaced. "Oh, it's *you!* Why, I oughta… look at THIS!" He snarled, sticking one foot out to show me. Half of it was gone, probably still wedged in that crevice by the Pearl.

I winced inside, but shrugged sincerely. "Well, you should have beaten it when I said. That wasn't a very safe place you were in."

"Well, neither is *this*, 'amigo'!" He took a step forward, shaking a fist at me.

"Relax." I said. "We're busting out of here."

"*We?*" He exclaimed, sounding incredulous. "*We* are *done* travelling together! I work solo, my friend, and I walk *alone*."

He turned and started for the compound again.

Chepito moved pretty fast for a guy who had just recently lost a part of his foot – for a while, anyway. He stumbled after a couple of yards, dropping his tool to the sand. I was right behind him, and helped him to his feet.
He jerked himself away and started brushing himself off. I picked up the small drill, but he snatched it away from me and started walking again, albeit a little slower this time.

"Nice drill." I remarked.

"Drill!?" He snapped. "This here's a cordless, high-speed, reciprocating *chisel*. And look!" He showed it to me enthusiastically. "It's a Bust-All! They don't usually give these to the new guys."

"So how'd you get one?"

"I had booty to trade. Trade's the name of the game out here."

"Booty?" I asked with a laugh. "Where'd you get booty, Blondebeard?"

"It's all over the ocean floor!" He said. "Jewellery, precious coins… you people in your fancy boats never know about it 'cause you just never stop and look."
He had a point. "So, you traded jewellery and precious coins… for a power tool?" I asked slowly.

"It's a *Bust-All!* " He insisted. "Besides, what else am I gonna blow my loot on out here? Race cats?"
He had another point.

"Maybe you can help me get something I need." I said, changing the topic.

"Whatcha be needin'?" He asked.

"A gun."

"*Oooo*… that's gonna cost some." He warned. "Whatcha got on ya?"

"First, *can* you get me a gun?"
Chepito nodded. "You're cautious, I like that. Well, I'm pretty sure I can get you a gun. Don't know about bullets, though."

"That's fine, I don't need bullets."
Chepito gave me a sideways look. "Maybe you're more in the market for a hammer…?"

"I don't want to sprout anyone." I replied, a little testy. "I just need to make a point."

"You'd make yer point better with a few rounds." He shrugged. "But… bullets are real hard to come by. If you don't want 'em, then I think we can make a deal… but it still won't come cheap."

"Well, you find me that gun, and I'll take stock of what I've got. We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Fine by me." He said, turning to walk away. "Chalk-head…" I heard him add in a disgruntled mutter.

I eventually walked back to the compound by myself, but slowly. I fell behind most of the other souls in line. I almost didn't notice when a small few of them split away from the rest. They looked incredibly furtive, and so I hurried to follow them. Anyone who had a reason to sneak around was someone I needed to keep tabs on, I figured.

They skirted quickly around the main factory area and up over a sandy ridge. I followed them down into a huge pit with crumbling walls, but featuring a lot of peculiar right-angles. Probably an old quarry. Then it was up a steep, winding track over another ridge and down towards a beach on a remote corner of the island.
I paused at the top of the ridge, watching the small group as they ran down to the beach. Once they had gotten this far they stopped being so sneaky. Now they were just loping around and jabbering to each other. They obviously assumed that there'd be no one to see them on this part of the island, which did seem fairly empty – with the exception of some faint lights glowing down on the beach, that is.

I followed after them, moving as quickly and as quietly as I could. When I finally got down to the sandy beach, what I had taken to be a large building from the ridge turned out to be an old ship in a crudely-improvised dry dock. I tried to whistle through my teeth like Slisko had learned to do, but only managed a dry huffing sound like a tire going flat.
I craned my neck when I got to the rusty hulk, trying to see up on deck; but it was getting pretty dark by then, it was a huge ship, and I couldn't make out much except that it looked like an old tanker. I found a rope ladder dangling carelessly over the side and began to slowly climb, ever-so-quietly, up to the top.
There were a few chunks of luminescent coral scattered around the deck which provided some dull light. I shortly found an open hatch and, after crouching beside it while listening for any movement inside, went in.
I moved softly through the dark corridors of the ship, finding no one. They had to be around somewhere, I thought.
I finally neared what I supposed must be the engine room, when my foot caught around something in the dark. I hit the floor with a loud clatter.
"Hey!" A deep voice shouted. "Who's out there?"
I knew that voice! It was a voice I knew all too well; a voice I never thought I would hear again.
"Glottis?" I asked in disbelief.
Glottis poked his huge head out from the hatch door in front of me.
"Manny!" He exclaimed.
"*Glottis!*" I exclaimed back, feeling more overjoyed than I'd ever been since coming to the Land of the Dead. "You're okay!"
"Well…" He said, pulling me to my feet. "It hurt a little when I hit."
"I gotta tell you, *carnal*…" I admitted, grasping one of his massive hands in a two-fisted shake. "I thought you were dead!"
"I've been havin' a GREAT time. C'mon!"

He led me into the large engine room where there was gathered the little gang I had followed along the beach, with a few other souls present. Quick introductions were gotten out of the way, and I was able to ask the question that was bugging me all this time.
"How'd you survive, *mano*?"

"Oh, that's easy." Glottis answered. He gestured to the coral miners beside us. "They'd lost a few people, working so close to the edge, so they strung up some chain-link fencing a while back. It managed to hold me while Jason here got a rope." He shrugged. "It was just simple hand-over-hand after that."

"Well, you have no idea what a relief this is." I said happily. Glottis grinned broadly. "But what are you guys doing here?"

"This ship got too close to the edge." One of the souls, named Anton, answered. "The crew dropped anchor and it held… but they didn't do it soon enough. The ship went over, hanging by the anchor over the edge like a Christmas tree ornament. A few of the crew that weren't flung away or smashed to bits managed to crawl up the chain and get to the island. You can imagine what a ship like this means to us."

"Easily." I said. "But how'd you get this ship up here?"

"Hard work." Anton replied smugly. "Lots of cable, some ropes, winches, pulleys… there's a lot of industrial hardware on this island, most of which Domino Hurley doesn't know about."

"Not surprising." I said, considering how sure of himself he was. "But why are you still here?"

"The accident wrecked the engines." Anton answered. "We haven't been able to repair them."

"Yeah." Glottis nodded. "But listen to this…" He turned to fiddle with the machinery for a moment, and the hulking diesel engine roared to life briefly before spluttering into silence. "I ask you, is there an engine that can resist the love that's in these hands?"

He projected a massive grin.

"Apparently not." I answered in amazement. "I think this baby's our ticket out of here!"

"Oh yeah, good point." Glottis said, full of sarcasm. "I was just wrenching her for fun, but your idea's good too."

"Okay, okay." I laughed. "So I'm stating the obvious. How long before you've got her working?"

Glottis shrugged. "Not sure. A few days. Weeks, maybe."

"I see." I muttered. Not great, but it would have to do. "Does anyone here have a gun?"

That drew a lot of confused looks. Glottis laughed at me.

"Manny, what are you gonna do? Take hostages and sprout 'em one-by-one until the engines start workin'?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "I just need one for Meché. She thinks the DOD arms its agents – don't ask me why – and she won't trust me until I hand over my daisy-maker."

Glottis shook his head. "What *is* it with you and the ladies?"

"Don't start, *carnal*." I warned.

"Sorry, Manny… but I don't think anyone here has a gun."

"Domino wouldn't still be here if *I* had one…" One guy piped up.

"I wouldn't mind sprouting him, myself." I said. "But I think we need to go easy on any revenge ideas. Domino's got Meché and those two little *angelitos* under his thumb every minute, and he's just given me a lesson about how on-the-ball he is. Anyone who makes a stupid play…"
I didn't have to finish.
"Maybe we'll have to leave them behind." Someone said. "If we're ever going to make a clean getaway."
"Forget it." I replied firmly. "If Meché and the little *angelitos* don't get out, then no one does. Got me?"
"Hey, man!" Another said angrily. "Who elected *you* the boss?"
I ignored the question, but realized how bossy I must have seemed. I quickly looked around.
"Now, I know none of you like the situation you're in. I sure as hell don't, I'll tell you that twice." I huffed. Glottis' ears twitched sharply, and I realized that I had just used one of Maximino's favourite phrases. "But what you may or may not know is that this isn't the way things were supposed to be for any of you. What Domino and his boss are up to is hardly approved DOD procedure. I don't know why the DOD is putting up with it, but the outfit Glottis and I belong to is called the Lost Souls Alliance, and we're fighting against them. Meché's the only solid link we have to these bastards, and I owe it to her – *personally* – to get her out of here. So if Glottis can get this ship working, it's gonna carry everybody away from here. That includes Meché. No arguments, clear?"
I got mostly nods.
"That's good. Now we can all be friends." I sighed.
"Question…" Anton said.
"Shoot."
"I don't know how accurate the rumours we've been hearing from recent arrivals are, but the LSA is supposed to be a huge, well-armed organization. If they're fighting Domino's gang, why are we still here?"
"*Mano*, before today, no one in the LSA even suspected that this island existed." I pointed out. The miners exchanged worried glances. "And Glottis and I are the only LSA agents who *do* know of it now. The bulk of the LSA is trying to strike at the heart of this gang, and that's all the way back in El Marrow. These guys were operating for years before anyone started getting wise to it. Get the idea? It's a big puzzle we're working on here, and most of the pieces have been very well hidden."
"It's okay, Manny." Glottis said reassuringly. "You don't have to scare them."
"I'm just trying to make them understand what we're up against, *carnal*."
"I think we're beginning to." Anton said. "So what are your plans, exactly?"
"Well, obviously." I replied calmly. "Glottis has to work his magic on these engines. Then we have to get everyone on this ship and get away. It'd be nice to sprout Domino first, but I think a quiet getaway is our best chance. I think I can distract him enough for that."
"How?"

"Well, Domino has this crazy idea about 'training' me to take his place when he leaves here. I don't know why he thinks I'd be his trusty, but I'll play along. Domino's overconfident, which I think is his biggest weakness. So if he thinks he's getting his way, he won't be on his guard as much as he should be, and maybe we can sneak away without too much trouble." But then I thought about the deck of cards – he picked up on that pretty quickly. A part of me wondered if he already knew about the ship. "If we do, we head for Puerto Zapato, and then overland to the end of the line and to the next world where you all belong."

"But what about Domino and the rest of the people who brought us to this place?" Jason asked.

"Leave that to those who deserve to be stuck in this world." I answered bleakly. "It's our problem, so we'll take care of it." I sighed, suddenly feeling old and tired. "Look, I'd love to explain everything to you – answer all your questions – but that'd take forever. We've all got a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it, but once we're free and clear I'll talk until my jaw drops off. Until then…"

There were a few nodding skulls by this point.

"I think you've made your point." Anton said. "It's imperative that we get away and that we *must* rescue everyone. I think you're right that answers can wait, but I think we'll all hold you to your promise."

"Okay, thank you." I replied, feeling relieved. "And one last thing… If no one's got a gun, I'm gonna need something to trade with."

Chapter 35 – Lil' Sprouter

The next morning I was standing on the beach near the crane, waiting patiently for Chepito. I waved him over when he came into sight.

"I've got some stuff you might be interested in. Any word on that thing I want?" I asked.

"Not yet." He answered.

"What?" I exclaimed. "Hey, you said—"

"I never said nothin' about getting' no boomer right away, so don't go givin' me a hard time about it! You think I can just hop over to Colorado for a gun show? It'll take some doing. Knowing what *you* have to trade might make it a tad easier."

"Okay, okay." I grumbled. I held open the sack I was carrying.

"Hey!" Chepito exclaimed, peering into the bag. "This stuff ain't bad!" He reached in, rummaging around while I just stood there looking awkward. After a moment, he pulled out a pair of silky water-stockings that were usually worn by women. I have no idea how they found their way into the bag.

"Is that REAL silk?" Chepito asked. "Where'd you get these?"

"I've been wearing them the whole time…" I lied. It was simpler and safer to tell the truth.

"You too?" He asked. That was more than I needed to know.

"I think we can do business, after all." He chuckled gleefully. "You've got some pretty good swag there, sonny-boy… but those stockings put you over the top. Yessiree, this makes it a *whole* lot easier. I'll be in touch."
He turned and walked out into the sea.

I spent some of that morning after talking to Chepito with the *angelitos*. They were a little upset about the cards, but on the other hand it put Domino in a new light for them. I found a whiteboard and a few markers that weren't dried up and we played hangman for a while. We got a scare when we heard footsteps out in the hall, but it turned out to be only Meché.
She didn't say much about anything. She was acting a little strangely. She said that the kids needed to be working, not playing. I tried to be funny by holding my pipe like a gun, and saying: "*Bang!* You're dead!"
The kids laughed but Meché just replied with, "Who isn't?" and left.
The little ones were a little subdued after that and went back to work. The incident worried me, but when I ran into Domino that afternoon he didn't say anything about it. He just took me and started my 'training'. He explained to me how the place worked, from the slaves digging out the glowing variety of coral to the shipping of the finished light bulbs. The shipping part interested me until I was told that it was the demon octopus that took care of that.
"Hey, Hurl." I asked. "What makes you think you can trust me to run this place when you go scampering back to Hector?"
"Oh, I don't have to *trust* you, Manny." He said with a laugh. "I only need to *control* you. Meché, those kids, everybody on this island – they're the strings. If you don't do your job, you can be sure I'll hear about it… and then someone will get hurt. I think that's plain enough."
There was something I still wanted to know: whether he had any scruples.
"How can you keep little children in a cage?"
"Trust me, it's easier than keeping *big* kids in a cage."
So, no scruples.
"Then I guess if I don't cooperate, you'll just send someone else over the edge. Is that it?" I grimaced.
"Well, I was thinking of just sprouting someone every time you give me trouble." He said, projecting a phantom smile. "But, hey… if the way your demon buddy bought it is what really gets to you, then that's just fine with me."
"Why are you doing all this?" I asked. I was supposed to be playing along to keep Domino from getting suspicious, but I was getting a little worked up. I wasn't being smart, as Max would say. "Don't you have a conscience? This is just wrong."
Domino laughed loudly; mockingly. "You kill me, Manny. Really. You sound just like one of those goody-goody DOD trainers. I'll bet you were their star pupil." He finally stopped laughing. "But, I'll tell ya something, Manny… right or wrong has got nothing to do with it. It's survival. The guy who's a winner goes to the top of the heap. The rest…"
He pointed his thumb down in a classic Roman emperor gesture.

"Right and wrong, morality and ethics…" He shook his head. "Just excuses for poor losers."

"Might makes right, huh?" I sneered.

He shrugged it off. "The ends justify the means, or whatever cliché works for you, kid."

"*None* of it works for me! People have to be treated fairly and justly – no exceptions."

"Now, don't get all messianic on me." He chided.

I shut up at that. Anything else Domino had to say on that or any other subject was something I didn't need to hear.

Domino kept me with him for the rest of the day. After finishing his lecture on how things worked, he took me around the operation. It was pretty educational, if not always in the way he intended.

Domino may have been convinced that there was no right or wrong, but my conviction of the opposite grew a little bit stronger. I was stuck in the Land of the Dead just the same as he was, so I can't claim to have been a better person; but as I listened to him and watched how he treated his 'puppets', I realized that there *was* a difference between us. As badly as I had lived my life, I wasn't the sort of person who would knock a little guy down and then ride him for the falling. Small as it was, that difference was important to me.

There wasn't much else I could take comfort in, in those days; I'll tell you *that* as many times as you can stand. But the one thing I found hard to stand with was that it took Chepito such a long time to get me the gun. The man swore up and down that he was working on it, and I took him at his word since I could trust his greed for what I had in that sack.

But Meché was… difficult. For one thing, she made it hard to talk to her. She kept her distance most of the time, and she kept bringing up that damned imaginary gun.

"Ready to turn over your heater?" She'd ask, or something like that, whenever I showed my face in her office.

"I would if I had one, baby." I'd reply, not that she ever believed me.

I can't say I blamed her, considering how our first meeting had turned out. Once, when Domino was nowhere around, I tried to break her reserve with the news that was making me anxious.

"I found a vessel!" I said.

"How?" She asked, icily disinterested. "Did you pull an inner tube out of the big crane wheels?"

"No, Glottis found it when he—"

For an instant, Meché returned to what I thought was her normal self.

"Glottis is *alive!?*" She exclaimed excitedly.

"Yeah! He — inner tube?"

But the moment passed. She told me not to make 'jokes' about escaping, because the kids might believe me. Which was sort of a good point, actually… not that I intended to even mention the ship to those *diablos*. I didn't want them to get all worked up before it was time to go. They'd have been bouncing off the bars of their cage, which was sure to get Domino suspicious.

For similar reasons, I kept away from the ship after that first visit. For the most part, I stayed where there wouldn't be a problem if Domino found me. I also wanted to be sure he wouldn't have any trouble finding me if he needed to. I didn't want him to have any reason to exert himself for his suspicions. There wasn't anything I could do to help with the work, anyway. Glottis was the master, and any help he needed he could get from the mechanically-skilled prisoners and the remnants of the ship's crew. I would only blow the whole scam if I was found anywhere other than where I was 'supposed' to be.

One late evening, as he marched out of the sea with the others, Chepito gave me the good news.
He pulled me into the deeper shadows behind a shed on the fringes of the compound – kind of pointless since he dispelled the shadows.
"Here's your new best friend…" He murmured as he pulled a wicked-looking semi-automatic from his tattered clothing. I handed over the swag. "Nice doing business with you, bucko." He said, and went on his way.
Chepito began laughing loudly before he was out of earshot. He probably figured he suckered me.
I checked over the gun. It was a little different from what I was used to. Since it fired chemical darts, it used a gas cylinder which made it feel more like a toy than a real weapon, but it was free of rust and it worked perfectly. I made sure it wasn't loaded and that the chamber was empty, then tried cocking it and pulled the trigger a few times. It popped in a reassuring way. I didn't want to hand Meché an obvious dud. If she took it as a sign of trust, then it was worth what I paid Chepito.

I went to find Meché. It was early enough that she should still have been in her office. She was, putting away the day's busywork.
"Here." I said calmly, handing her Chepito's gun. "What good is a relationship without trust?"
"True." She said, taking the gun with one hand while seeming to make some kind of adjustment to her hat with the other. "A relationship without trust is like a gun without bullets."
I was in a car wreck once. It happened in an instant, but once I saw it coming time slowed down to a crawl. The same thing happened when Meché took a Sproutella dart from her hat and loaded it into the gun. It must have taken only a fraction of a second, but it seemed like five long minutes as I stood there, unable to believe what I was seeing.
Meché kicked her chair away as she stood up, pointing the gun in my face.
"Guess you didn't realize a smart girl always keeps an extra round in her hat for mad days!" She snarled, waving the gun minutely toward Domino's door. "Get moving!"
"Meché!" I said desperately. "You don't know what—"
"I know exactly what I'm doing!" She snapped viciously. "*Move!*"
"Meché, if you'd just lis—"
"Enough, Manny!" She gave me a hard shove towards the door with her free hand.

"If you'd just listen to my escape plan first…" I was saying as she drove me into Domino's office.
When we came in – me with my hands in the air and Meché pushing me along with the muzzle of the gun – Domino seemed more amused than alarmed.
"Trouble in paradise, kiddos?" He drawled with the hint of a chuckle.
"You're letting us go right now!" Meché said, jabbing the back of my skull with her new weapon. "Or your boy Friday here gets it!"
Domino stood up from behind his desk. He moved around the perimeter of the room, seeming to keep away from us while actually getting closer. Meché didn't even seem to notice.
"Well, I hate to see you go, Manny." He said insincerely. "But the 'lady' does seem to have made up her mind."
"I'm *serious*." Meché insisted, sounding a little panicked. "I'll shoot him!" She once again jabbed the muzzle of the gun roughly into the back of my skull for emphasis.
"So, go ahead and shoot him, you sainted bitch!" Domino snapped. I felt the gun drop away from my skull. "The pinko bastard doesn't really work for me, anyway."
"But, I thought…" Meché stammered, obviously confused. She stepped uncertainly forward, coming between me and Domino. She stared right at me, the light seeming to dawn, then back to Domino. "I'll shoot *you*, then!"
But as she brought the gun up, Domino grabbed her wrist and wrenched her arm around behind her back.
"No, you won't." He said softly, as if to a lover, in her ear hole. "You're too good, remember?"
He gave her arm a savage twist – Meché gasping in pain – before grabbing the gun as it fell and pocketing it quickly. He propelled her towards the door.
"I'm not!" Meché yelled as he pushed her along. "I'm *not* good anymore!"
I just stood there, feeling quite numb, as Domino took her away.
"You've taken that away from me!" Meché went on, her voice fading a little with distance. "Keeping me a prisoner here! I'm gonna crack you open like a fake Ming vase! I'm gonna…"
They grew further away, and I lost the ability to make out what she was saying.
There was a sharp, muffled clang. I flinched at the harsh sound.

A few moments later, Domino came back in looking very pleased in a sadistic, almost sexually-satisfied way.
"The kid's all right." He said with a deep chuckle. "She's a firecracker, but a night in the cooler usually dampens her fuse."
He sat down behind his desk and looked up happily at me.
"What did you do to her?" I demanded, finally finding my voice.
"She's in a safe place." Domino answered with another laugh. "She just needs a little timeout, that's all."
I made a guess. "You think you can break her just by locking her up?"

"No." Domino said, as if admitting something secret. "But the lack of fresh oxygen slows her down just enough so that I can open the door…" He 'grinned' smugly. "…free of fear."
He leaned back and put his feet up on the desk, cradling his skull between his hands.
"By the way, Manny…" He went on. "How's the, uh… 'escape plan' coming along?"
"That's strictly confidential, Dom." I replied with some barely-repressed sarcasm. "But we'll be test-firing the rocket any day now."
"Hey, sounds good." He said with a laugh. "Keep me posted, huh?"
"Sure thing, *mano*." I said with a subtle snarl, backing out of the office.
He let me go quietly.

Chapter 36 – The Great Escape

I went looking for Meché. Domino had her locked up, there was a loud clang, and from what Domino had said, it had to be somewhere airtight. I also knew that it must have been close to Domino's office, or else he wouldn't have gotten there and back so quickly.
That narrowed it down to the big industrial wall-safe.

When I got there, I pressed my skull up against the door. I was sure I could hear Meché's voice on the other side. I couldn't understand what she was saying, but she was probably shouting. The sound was very faint.
The door was huge and thick, but the big key sat glimmering inside the keyhole. I couldn't believe my eye-sockets. I reached out to unlock the safe, but then my hand dropped back to my side before I touched it. I couldn't possibly turn the key.
Domino left it in the lock for a reason, I was certain, to prove that he really did control me. I had to be sure of things, so I snatched the key and hurried over to the ship.

"I gotta know, *carnal*." I said when I finally reached the engine room. "How soon?"
Glottis was half-buried in the guts of one of the massive engines, his rear end and legs the only visible parts of him. He was too busy working even to talk.
"I was about to send word, Manny." He replied in a muffled voice. "It looks like we can launch maybe sometime tomorrow."
"Really?" I exclaimed. "I thought you said it would take weeks."
"Change of strategy." He said, pausing for a moment to make some loud clanging noises in the bowels of the machinery. "We figured getting outta here quick was more important than making top speed, so we concentrated on the number one engine, using parts from the other two."
"Is that a good idea?" I asked worriedly. "I mean, this tub has three engines for a reason."
"No kidding." He retorted. "But we're getting kinda desperate here, you know? Anyway, we're pretty sure we can fix up number two once we get underway."

"I'm not sure I like that 'pretty sure'."

"Hey, Manny." Glottis exclaimed, sounding a little peeved. "This boat's been through a lot! This ain't a shipyard and we're makin' do with scrap and good intentions here! Cut me some slack, okay?"

"I'm sorry…" I said, truly meaning it. "I know this is your element, but we've got a little problem."

"*Another* one?" He exclaimed in a bitterly sarcastic tone. I sympathized for him – I knew this was piling a lot of weight on his shoulders.

"Meché got Domino mad. He locked her up." I sighed. Glottis said something I couldn't make out, but it sounded very pungent. "I can get her out, but I don't dare unless we can get away quickly."

"Okay, Manny." Glottis said loud enough so I could hear. "That's a real *big* problem; but if you can get Miss Colomar free, go ahead and do it. I guarantee we can be underway by no later than noon tomorrow."

"Are you absolutely sure, *carnal*?"

There was some more loud clanging. Maybe it was my imagination, but it sounded a little more frantic than before.

"We just won't wait for daylight to launch, that's all. We were about to fuel up, anyway. It'll take a while – the stuff's been stashed all over the island for safety, you know? It'll be a little risky to launch at night, especially when we're all tired, but we can do it."

"Okay." I replied with gratitude. "I know I can trust you about that. You have Jason spread the word to get everyone down here pronto, and I'll get Meché and the kids out of the factory tonight."

"Will do, boss." Glottis said, as the clanging resumed.

I went back to the safe. I put my head up to the door again, but couldn't hear anything. I jammed the key back in the hole and turned it around. I pulled, but the door didn't budge. Then I noticed I couldn't see the hinges, so I pushed. It moved slightly.

I bore down all my weight on the door and managed to push it open.

It was a pretty massive door.

The room was very dark inside, with only one tiny light bulb in the ceiling.

"Meché…?" I called out softly. "You in there?" I took a step forward, moving into the safe. "Time to come out, honey… no time for hide and seek."

I let go of the door as I moved further in. The corners of the safe were in dark shadow. I looked around slowly, trying to see as much as I could.

Maybe Meché had fallen asleep in the time I'd been away – going to and from the ship took well over an hour.

As I scanned the semi-darkness, I heard a loud rumbling sound.

I spun around to see the massive door falling shut behind me. I lunged at it to try and stop its movement, but there weren't any good handholds on the inside. It kept on closing.

I only managed to slow it down a little. At the last moment, I snatched my fingers away to avoid them getting crushed. The door fell shut with a heavy bang, but not the crash it had made before. I doubted Domino could have heard it, and half an hour later I was sure of it.

Just as sure as I was that Meché wasn't there.

I began to wonder feverishly if maybe I had made a mistake.
Maybe Domino *hadn't* put Meché in the safe. He could have put her in one of the locked offices and then slammed the safe door shut and left the key to trick me into locking myself in – except that made no sense, even for Domino. On top of which, I was certain that I *had* heard Meché's voice through the door.
I looked around some more, but I didn't find any other doors. I began tapping on the walls, listening for a hollow sound or emergency escape route. Eventually, after a few tense moments, I successfully found one, and even noticed a seam in the wall… but there was no way to open it.
I tapped on the hollow spot. Quietly at first, but more loudly when nothing seemed to happen.

Suddenly I was swinging my fist into thin air, as the wall slid open before me.
"Manny!" Meché exclaimed from the other side. Then, she looked over my shoulder into the main room. "*<u>WHY</u> is that door closed!?*"
"Uh… the wind?" I suggested feebly.
Meché released a groan of sheer disappointment and went back into the other room. I gingerly followed her.
There was a lot more light coming from the other room now, and I could see the recessed latch in the hidden door. All the wear and tear on my knuckles for nothing.
Meché walked over to the far side of the room and crouched down against a wall, putting her face in her hands. I went over to her and spoke in a quietly calm manner.
"Thanks for not sprouting me."
"I'm sorry…" She said into her hands. She took them away slowly and looked up in my general direction – but not quite at me. "I should have trusted you, it's just…" She clenched and unclenched her hands. "The last two years have been pretty tough, you know?"
Her voice rose a little too high for comfort at the end of that sentence.
"Yeah." I said, sitting down beside her. "Can I ask you just one question?"
She shrugged.
"What were you doing that whole year I was in Rubacava?"
She was silent for a moment, before replying in a hollow voice. "I was lost."
"What did—"
Meché surged to her feet and strode over to the door. "*I don't want to talk about that year!*" She snapped in a frightening way. Then she stopped and turned back around. "Please…" She added weakly.
"Sure." I said. "I'll lay off the questions."
"Great." She said with forced cheerfulness. "Now if we could only get you to lay off the cologne."
"Hey, I'm a sailor now. We *have* to wear this stuff."
She 'smiled' tiredly and sat down on a short stack of suitcases piled in the corner.

"What this safe needs is a couple of nice easy chairs." I said.
"Vault." Meché replied.
"Huh?"
"If you can walk inside it, Manny, it's a vault."
"Oh… yeah."
Meché looked pensive for a moment. "Did you mean what you said the other day? About a ship, I mean?"
"Every word."
"And Glottis *is* alive?"
"Definitely."
She went silent again for a while, and I didn't interrupt.
"That wasn't your gun, was it?" She said eventually, sounding completely miserable.
"Well, I traded good junk for it, but…" I shrugged. "Two hours ago it wasn't mine."
She shook her head slowly, sincerely. "I've made a mess of everything."
"Don't kick yourself around. You did what you thought you had to do… although I can't understand why you'd believe what Domino said about DOD agents being armed."
"Stockholm syndrome." She replied sadly, shaking her head again.
"Uh… what?" I stammered, baffled.
"It's the tendency of people in hostage situations to identify with their captors."
"That's crazy!" I said without thinking.
"In a sense…" Meché replied quietly. "If you want to be crude about it. But it's a real condition. Put a person through enough stress and they'll believe anything, especially when there's only one source of information. It's a coping mechanism, in a way. If you come to believe that the person putting you through hell is somehow on your side, it becomes easier to endure." I must have looked sceptical, because she declared, "I've seen it, Manny. Once, when I was volunteering at a mental hospital, I worked with a few hostage victims. At first, they were more concerned with what was happening to their former captors than about what had happened to themselves." She shook her head once again. "I never thought I'd ever fall victim to that… 'craziness'."
"If you're right…" I said carefully. "Then you didn't have much of a choice."
"That doesn't make it easier to accept." She snapped, sounding bitter. After a moment, she sighed deeply.
"I know…" She went on, taking a deep breath. "You're only trying to help, but… it'll take some time." Then, Meché fixed her eye sockets on me. I felt a cold chill run up my spine. "Manny… why didn't you look for me?"
I got a creepy feeling of déjà vu, except this really was Meché, not some demonic raven perched on a pair of binoculars.
"I did." I said, wishing I had something stronger than words to prove it with. "Glottis scoured every road between El Marrow and Rubacava while I hounded every soul in every jerkwater stop along the way. We pestered waitresses and short-order cooks, bus drivers and wrench monkeys… everybody human or demon who worked along every stretch of blacktop we could find."

I laughed bitterly. "It never occurred to *anyone* on our side that you were still in that damned forest. I figured you were hiding out… and God only knows what Salvador, with all his crazy conspiracy theories, had suspected."

"Well, I wasn't hiding. When Domino found me…" Meché's voice broke as she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered deeply. "I was ready to welcome the devil."

And she wasn't far off, I thought.

"If only…" I began, staring intently at the cold, hard floor. "I suppose Domino sent you into the club to draw me out." I said, feeling so mad that I wanted to punch something – but I managed to hold back. There wasn't anything I wanted to sock in that vault, anyway. "Why didn't you tell Lupé what was going on?"

"Domino was outside the door… with a gun." She answered. *That* was chilling. "He told me to say only what he'd instructed me to or he'd shoot the 'dingbat at the counter'." She looked down, projecting embarrassment. "His words… sorry."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't endanger Lupé." I said slowly, tamping down my unsettled feelings. After all, I didn't need yet another soul on my conscience; and irrationally, I suddenly felt guilty because I had never bothered to learn anything personal about my ditzy hat-check girl. I hoped she was doing okay.

Meché remained silent for a moment… for reasons of her own, probably.

"Well, as soon as she went to find you, Domino burst in and dragged me away." She went on. "But once we were on the boat, I had a little bit of freedom. I kept watch for you from on deck, and when I saw you running towards the boat…"

"*Bam!* " I interjected.

"Domino was *not* happy. I spent the entire trip locked up in the brig, until I was tossed overboard at the Pearl. The captain was on Hector's payroll." She groaned with the memory. "And so, here we are – locked in a vault on a deserted factory island on the edge of the world. Pretty bleak, huh?"

I really didn't want to answer that. I would have had to be honest.

"So, um…" I looked around, trying to think of anything safe to say. "What's in those suitcases?"

Meché got up from the stack of cases she had perched on. "Take a look."

I unclasped the one on top and let it spring open. When I saw what was inside, I gasped in shock.

"*¡Hijole!* "

"It's all the Double-N tickets Hector and Domino have stolen over the years." Meché said grimly. "Each one stolen from a good soul, and now they just… sit there."

And then, something inside my mind finally clicked.

"That's it!" I exclaimed, slamming the lid shut.

"What?"

"*That's* what's been bothering me!" I said, half to myself. "They just *sit there!* In the days when I was a hot salesman, I used to see Double-N tickets all the time, and they *moved!* " I explained.

"What do you mean, 'they moved'?"

"They become agitated around human souls, and the ticket that belongs to you will actually fly into your hands! But these tickets…" I popped the suitcase open again and waved my hand over the little golden slips. "…and the tickets in that suitcase of Charlie's, are lifeless. It's like they're *dead*." I closed the case again. "Why would Hector and Domino be hoarding cases of counterfeit Double-N tickets?" I asked, mostly to myself.

"They're selling them, right?" Meché asked.

"That's what Domino says. Salvador thinks that's what's happening here, too… but I'm not so sure that's the whole story anymore."

Meché cocked her head in a confused way.

"Think about it." I went on. "We've been assuming they've been stealing the tickets and then selling those *very same tickets*. Get it?"

"I think so…" She replied slowly. "If they're stealing tickets only to sell them, why bother making counterfeits?"

"Right. And if they can counterfeit…"

"…*why bother stealing?"* We finished together.

"You're right, Manny!" Meché said, nodding. "There *has* to be something more to it than what Domino's been saying."

"And maybe more than he knows. When Don Copal brought him into our division, Domino was bright green. He wouldn't know a genuine Double-N ticket from a five-dollar bill."

"And no more than most people in the Land of the Dead would." Meché added. "So is Domino being duped, too?"

"I don't think so, not in the way you mean." I answered. "But Hector… he must have an angle that doesn't include Domino or anybody else."

"Then he must be hoarding the genuine tickets for himself." Meché said confidently. "But why?"

"I don't know, angel… but it's something big. So big that he needs help. He must be buying that help with the counterfeit scam."

"You're probably right, but that doesn't help us get out of this vault."

"I know it." I groused. "There's a ship waiting for us, but nobody knows where we are." I took a quick look around. "There's gotta be – hey, what's that up there?"

Meché looked to where I was pointing. "What, the vent?"

"Looks pretty wide… but too high up. I don't think I could reach it even if I stood on your shoulders."

"Wouldn't it make more sense for me to stand on *your* shoulders, anyway?"

"Are you kidding? Look at your heels!"

Meché kicked off her shoes and planted her hands defiantly on her hips.

"Oh, all right." I said with a laugh. "Let's get these suitcases under the vent."

We moved the large stack and I climbed on top.

"Okay, try not to tip us over, yeah?" I said cautiously. "This pile isn't very steady."

"Right." She replied, getting onto the cases with me.

I helped her climb up onto my shoulders. The pile wobbled dangerously.

"Can you reach the vent?" I asked.
"Just." She answered.
The grill was rusted on there pretty tight, but Meché eventually got it off. She removed the large grate from the vent and lowered it, almost whacking me in the head.
"Do you think you can get in?" I asked after the grill slammed to the floor.
"If you give me a boost." She said.
I pushed upwards on the rickety pile and she scrambled into the ducts.

Meché crawled her way through to the outside of the vault to let me out, but after about half an hour later she poked her head back through the vent.
"The key's gone!" She announced.
"Great." I mumbled. "I guess Domino wanted me in here after all."
"Or maybe he really did forget about it and only came back to collect it."
"Maybe." I said, unsurely. "Question is, can I fit through that?"
"It's pretty roomy for me." She answered. "And you're not that big."
"Thanks."
"Well, it's true."
She leaned out of the vent as far as she could and reached out her hand. I stood gingerly on the cases and reached up for her, but missed by a few inches.
"Hang on…" I said, unbuckling my belt. "We can use my belt as a rope."
"Manny…" She began.
"Relax, I don't have any bones *you* don't have."
"Well… okay."
I took my heavy sailors belt off and tossed the end up to her. I grasped the buckle for extra assistance. She scooted back into the vent and helped me climb up.
"*Gaah!* " I exclaimed when I touched the freezing metal of the vent, involuntarily jerking upwards and banging my head.
"Cold?" Meché asked, a sly grin in her voice.
"Meché!" I said through gritted teeth.
"That'll teach you to jump to conclusions." She said merrily. "Maybe I *am* a saint, but that doesn't mean I'm innocent."
"I'll try to remember that…" I groaned.
She laughed at me and started creeping back down through the ducts.

Chapter 37 – Setting Sail

Meché led me to where she had dropped out before. When we finally exited the ducts we carefully made our way back to Meché's office. Her idea. Domino's office was dark inside and there was no sign of him.
Meché collected a few children's books and put them into a bag. Then we went back to my office to get the *angelitos*. They were asleep when we arrived. We gently awoke them and told them to be absolutely quiet. They looked a little scared as we opened the cage and lifted them out.
I grabbed some coral to light our way.
Meché carried Bibi while I had Pugsy.

We left the factory. It felt truly deserted now at this time. I led Meché through the old quarry and down to the beach. The ship was still in its makeshift dry dock, but there was a large crowd around it. They kept well back, nervous but quiet, watching Glottis and his crew work.
I ran up to the ship and called out. "Hey, *mano!* "
Glottis looked down from the deck, his figure a huge black shadow against the stars.
"Oh, THERE you are!" He hollered back. "What kept you guys?"
"Got locked in a sa—" I began, but glanced over towards Meché. "—vault."
"Oh… well, we're all fuelled up and getting ready to launch."
"Everybody here?"
"Should be."
"Any idea how long it'll be?"
Glottis seemed to shrug – hard to tell in the pitch darkness. "About an hour or so. We want to be sure we do this right. There won't be a second chance."
"Take all the time you need, but no more than you need."
"Check!" He said at the top of his lungs, and disappeared over the side again.

I walked back over to Meché. She was sitting in the coarse, faintly glowing coral sand. Bibi was curled up on her lap, while Pugsy was sprawled beside her. I sat down next to them.
"It's cold." Meché said.
"Yeah… but not as cold as where we're going."
"So where *are* we going, Manny?"
"End of the line." I answered. "Once we get to Puerto Zapato, we go overland across an arctic waste and up a mountain. According to the brochures, anyway."
"Lovely." She replied in a small voice.
"They're the final challenges." I said. "Of course, *you* were supposed to go right by them. But I'm afraid we'll have to go through, instead."
"It'll be hard on the children." Meché whispered.
"Well, we'll get 'em through. Everyone is gonna make it – I promise."
"Okay, Manny."
I just wished I was as confident as I sounded.

It was two long hours before Glottis was satisfied that the ship was ready to launch. He climbed down from the deck of the ship, walked over to me and nodded his approval.

"Okay, Manny. We want everyone to stand further back just in case it goes horribly wrong."

"It won't." I encouraged. "You've got the magic touch."

"Right now, I don't believe in magic. So, back all you guys go."

There was enough people carrying coral around us that I got my first really good look at Glottis in several days. He looked absolutely terrible. His skin was tilting more towards yellow, and there were deep red circles under his eyes. Maybe it was a trick of the dim coral light, but maybe not.

"Are you okay, *carnal?*" I asked, deeply concerned.

"Sure." He replied. "I just haven't had a lot of sleep lately."

"Once we're away, *you* are taking some time off."

"No kiddin'." He grumbled as he turned back to the ship.

"By the way," I called, as Glottis turned back to me, "do we know what this ship's called?"

"*La Mancha*." He answered, turning again to trudge back over to the ship.

"Well, let's hope we're not tilting at windmills." I said to Meché, taking a deep breath. I then raised my voice to the pressing crowd. "Listen up, everbody! They're gonna launch! Back, back!"

Even if Glottis didn't believe in magic, I sure did – and the *La Mancha* slid into the water as nice as you please; and she stayed on top, which was more important. The ship moved out a small way, then dropped anchor fore and aft to hold her steady.

We then began the long process of ferrying everyone across on rafts. There was a slight tinge of light in the east as the last of the prisoners boarded and we got underway.

"Well, how do you like our boat?" I said happily to Meché, coming down from the bridge with Glottis after having set our course (we had to depart in a wide arc in order to find a channel deep enough to get through the reef and into the open sea).

"She'll be something, once Glottis gets a good hold on her." She answered.

"I don't think that'll be necessary, really…" Glottis mumbled.

"You *are* tired." I said to him. "Get some rest."

"Not until we are free and clear." He replied, going below decks.

"Once we are, he's going to bed even if I have to tie him down." I said to Meché.

"Are you sure he's just tired, Manny? He doesn't look well."

"He did in a few days a job that should've taken weeks. Of course he's tired."

Meché tried to get a better grip on the kids, but they were asleep and limp in her arms.

"Take Pugsy, will you?" She asked.

"Sure." I said, taking him gently. "We should take them below."

"No, not yet." Meché replied, taking a deep breath. "I've been cooped up in that factory for months, and a brig for a year before that. The kids have been in a cage for I don't know how long. I want to stay in the open air for a while."
She started walking around the deck among the other souls, some standing or walking, or lying down in an attempt to sleep. I followed after her.
The *La Mancha* was a lot bigger than the *Lola* – plenty of space to move around in.
We paused for a moment when we came to a small group being led in prayer by a nun. Meché stood there quietly, and then crossed herself when they finished.

"Thank you, Sister Calabaza." Meché said quietly as we moved away.

"Yeah?" I asked, surprised. "That's the case Domino stole from me."

"And you stole my case from him." Meché replied with a twinkle in her voice. "And that's exactly how this whole thing started."

"No." I countered. "It started when Hector LeMans died."

"True." She agreed. "But how will it end?"

"I don't know, angel – but it won't be a happy ending for Hector, not if Sal and Eva have their way."

Chapter 38 – Demon of the La Mancha

Meché and I walked around the deck for a while, finishing up at the railing by the port bow. Pugsy and Bibi were asleep, curled up in a blanket on the deck nearby.

"…and," I was saying, "it seemed that as soon as I had turned around, my whole crew was sprouted. If it wasn't for Glottis…" I shrugged.
I looked back the way we had come. We had made our way past the reef, and there was no trace of the island except for a faint outline on the horizon. The sun was almost clear of the eastern horizon, and things were looking far more hopeful – but my own story was bringing me down.

"I guess I haven't been fair to you, huh?" Meché said solemnly after I had trailed off. "You've had a rough couple of years, too."

"Well, *I* wasn't the one lost in the forest."

"But I didn't have to watch a close friend sprout, and have the same thing happen to a crew I was responsible for. That's a lot to have to go through."

"But I wasn't the one sprouted. Bad things happen to everyone around me, but I come through without a scratch."

"Are you sure?" Meché asked. "Look at how you're punishing yourself. *You* didn't shoot Lola, but you hold yourself more responsible than the guy who did."

"I could have gone after her right away, you know. Just like I could have sent my crew ashore as soon as I got Salvador's message."

"But you didn't." Meché said in an aggravated tone. "Not because you're evil, or because you're fated to destroy everyone around you. Manny, you are *not* a special case. I hate to pop your balloon, but we're all in the same boat."

She gave a sharp, bitter laugh. "We're *all* victims of Hector here – you included! The only difference is, you didn't fall into the trap so easily. They're shooting blindly and hitting innocent bystanders trying to bring you down… but you're not responsible for that."

"But I can't help thinking that I could have done things differently, and no one would have gotten hurt."

"Well, you'd be worse than Domino if you didn't have regrets. I can't make your burden easier to bare, Manny. I'd carry it for you if I could. But I can't do that. No more than you can carry mine. But, most importantly, you mustn't compare burdens. And don't beat yourself up because you think yours isn't heavy enough."

"Is that what I'm doing?" I wondered out loud, doubting but fearful that Meché was right.

"I don't really know." She answered with a shrug. "But I think so. I really don't think there's anyone on this ship who would want to trade places with you. I'd rather spend another year in that forest than to have watched a friend like Lola sprout." Meché shuddered deeply, but then gave a heartfelt sigh. "In a way, you know… she was lucky."

"You're kidding me, right?"

Meché shook her head. "She could have sprouted up in that lighthouse alone, Manny. I don't know what it's like to sprout, but I do know what it means to die alone."

I remembered how I had found Meché, in a hospital bed by herself, with nothing – not a nurse or even a bunch of grapes – in the room with her.

"Why do things have to be this way?" I asked towards the fiery east.

"People have been asking that same question for thousands of years, Manny." Meché said dryly. "I don't know the answer. I only know that the world is bigger than I can understand, so I just try to cope with my own small part of it and make it a little more bearable."

"Like reading stories to small children locked in a cage?"

"Like reading stories to small children locked in a cage." She agreed. "It's either that, or get into a funk when I can't set them free."

"Harsh." I said, feeling the implied rebuke.

"Well, you started this conversation." Meché said with a careless shrug.

"And I should take my medicine?"

"I can only be honest with you, Manny."

"I think…" I went on, not totally certain about what I was saying. "I think that I'm gonna need that." I peered out over the vast ocean. "We've got a long journey ahead and somebody's got to keep me on track."

We lapsed into a brooding silence. Meché broke it first.

"So, are you really gonna take me to El Marrow and try to get your job back?" She asked slowly.

"There's no job for me now." I answered with the ghost of a laugh. "Except to bring you and everyone else in this tub to the end of the road."

"But if you aren't going to use me to get your job back…" Meché asked as she moved, somewhat hesitantly, closer to me. "Why did you spend all this time trying to find me?"

She looked intently into my face.
"Meché, I…" I stammered. I wasn't sure how to answer. I'd had a lot of time to think it over, ever since Salvador had shipped me off to Rubacava. There were LSA objectives, personal obligations, but…
"I needed to find you." I finished.
Everything else was just details.

Suddenly, there was a resonating crash as the entire deck lurched violently and Meché fell into my arms. I stumbled backwards and managed to keep us both on our feet. The hull rang like a gong from the heavy impact.
A wave of souls rushed to the port side to look down into the water. Surfacing below us was the same submarine Glottis and I had hitched a ride on.
A hatch popped open… and there was Domino, huge and vicious as ever, his dark eye sockets fixed on my position.
"I gave you *one job*, Manny!" He shouted right at me, as if he knew exactly where I would be standing. "And look at you, already screwing it up!"

Well, this was bad. The *La Mancha* was limping along on only one engine; Domino's sub could easily run rings around us, and I had to assume it was armed. For all I knew, we could have sprung any number of leaks when the sub rammed into us; but at that moment, Domino was focusing entirely on me. That was an advantage for everyone on the tanker… I hoped.
Before anyone could stop me, I leapt over the side of the ship and dropped down to the deck of the submarine.

Domino had his scythe out by the time I landed.
Just the kind of guy to practice Oxford-regulation boxing and then pull a blade out when it actually came time to fight.
"I suppose you realize that this is gonna go down on your permanent record!" He crowed.
I snapped my own scythe open. I had often wondered why I kept it, these last couple of years. Now, I was simply glad I had it.
"Look, Dom." I snarled. "I'm *not* gonna work for you!"
"Oh, don't worry about that, Manny." He sneered. "You're fired. Just consider this…" His scythe blade whooshed menacingly past my head, "…your *severance*."
We locked blades. Domino brutally twisted his around and I went down like a rock. He began to laugh sadistically.
"Ooh, this doesn't look good for the kid!" He jeered, bringing the butt of his scythe down with a clang right where my head had been a second before.
I jumped up once more and swung with all my might, but only managed to slice his coat sleeve.
He looked more angry than worried. I'd probably just ruined an expensive suit for all its cheap appearance.
"Smart strategy." He growled, jabbing a forefinger at me. "*Always* let your boss win."

He swung at me again, and I once again hit the floor with a crash. My skull bounced sickeningly against the sub's deck.

"At least at the old Christmas party you passed out before you really got hurt!" He laughed mockingly.

"Manny!" I heard Meché shouting from somewhere far above. "The octopus!"

At first I didn't understand. The octopus was inside the sub, it wasn't a threat. But then, almost immediately after, I got it.

The evil creature's 'head' was jammed up inside a tower towards the front of the sub, its eyes staring out of two half-globes on either side.

I realized at that moment what I had to do; so I spun around from the deck and buried my scythe blade deep into one of the demon's monstrous eyes.

The submarine rocked violently as the octopus jerked itself out of the tower. Domino almost went overboard, but 'almost' doesn't count. The giant hatch amidship crashed open as the octopus jetted away, trailing pink blood.

Domino stared after it, his jaw hanging open. After a moment he turned back to me and shouted incredulously.

"I don't *believe* you, Calavera!" He roared, slamming the brunt of his scythe into the deck with anger. "You're losing a fight, so you pick on one of my *pets*!?" His voice rose shrilly to the question.

Domino seemed to move only slightly, but the next thing I knew I was flat on my back, skull ringing and vision swimming from the brute-force he had impacted upon me.

I stared up groggily as Domino continued to rage above me.

"Why aren't you more like me, Manny?" He demanded, sounding absurdly hurt. "I've been trying to show you how, but you *just – don't – listen!* " He emphasized his point by waving his scythe in my face, coming close to almost popping my skull off. "If you'd just adopt the proper attitude, look what could happen to you!" He spread his arms wide, as if that would give me a better view of what he was.

Just at that moment, a heavy rope snaked down and hit the deck beside me. I staggered to my feet and grabbed the rope tightly. The enormous tanker slammed into the side of the submarine a second time, knocking Domino off his feet.

I began climbing frantically while Glottis, up on the *La Mancha*'s deck, began hauling up the rope.

I looked down behind me when Glottis suddenly gave a panicked look and saw Domino following me up. I tried to climb faster but I was having problems seeing where I was putting my hands.

Glottis stopped pulling, his face creased in thought. Then, without warning, he started yanking the rope up faster than before.

When I got to the railing lining the deck, Glottis reached down and practically flung me back onto the ship. In all the years I'd known Glottis, never before had I seen the downright savage look in his eyes that he had at that moment. Meché ran over to my side when I landed, and I saw Domino climbing over the rail.
Glottis grabbed him viciously by the neck and hoisted him up.
Domino reached into his coat and withdrew a gun. Glottis grabbed the hand holding the sprouter… and yanked the whole thing off.
Domino screamed with agony.
Glottis went on to systematically tear Domino to pieces, tossing each bone over the side. Domino's screams grew more and more shrill with each sickening dismemberment until he was just a screeching skull.
Then Glottis tore away his jawbone and threw it – along with the now-silent skull – overboard.

Nobody on deck moved or even made a sound.
Glottis turned to me, to where I half-lay on the deck with Meché frozen beside me in the act of helping me up.
"You were right, Manny." He said, sounding perfectly normal. "Sometimes you gotta hurt to save people."
"Are you… okay, Glottis?" I asked slowly.
"Yeah, sure." He replied casually.
"Okay…" Was all I could say.
"Well, I guess I'd better go and see if that sub did any damage." He went on, walking away from the port side of the ship. "'Scuse me." Glottis said to an astonished Sister Calabaza as he pushed past her towards the nearest hatch and went below decks.
"*Dios mio!*" I exclaimed softly.

Chapter 39 – Puerto Zapato and the End of the Line

I don't think there was anyone who felt sorry for Domino – he got what he deserved – although many passengers were uncomfortable with how it happened. None of the former prisoners had any real experience with demons, apart from Domino's 'pets'. Some were afraid that Glottis might suddenly turn on them. I did my best to keep imaginations from running wild, but I understood the fear. It might have been easier for them to take if Glottis hadn't been so calmly methodical about pulling Domino apart. Near as I could discover, when that daisy-maker came out of his coat, some unsuspected instinct kicked in and Glottis acted on it.
He wasn't angry, nor out of control; it was just what he had to do.
That, to me, was pretty creepy.

Once Glottis ensured that we weren't taking on water, I made him go to bed and made very sure he stayed there. After three days he was so restless that I let him go back to work anyway. His colour was a lot better and his nose was cold and wet, so I figured he was okay. He, along with Jason and the others who had helped to repair the ship, went to work on the number two engine.
The journey to Puerto Zapato was slow and difficult. There weren't many real sailors on board besides me and Glottis. The survivors of the *La Mancha*'s wreck were very few – not even half a dozen – and most of them were needed in the engine room. I had only one guy to help keep the ship on course and that was it. This meant I had to run the ship using complete neophytes. That was tough on everyone. There was a lot of frustration, tedium and confusion all wrapped up in a nearly derelict ship.
It wasn't pleasant.

Once we had settled into some kind of a routine, I gave the promised answers to the questions people had about Hector, Domino and the LSA, along with anything I knew about the Land of the Dead in general. That wore me down as much as anything else, and there were some questions I didn't know the answers to, like what they would find in the Land of Eternal Rest once we finally got there.
So it was a hard, slow trip; but eventually, we limped into Puerto Zapato. We made something of a stir when we sailed into the harbour. *La Mancha* was obvious not in any good shape, and it was equally obvious there wasn't any real crew onboard. I gave the port authorities a story about being shipwreck survivors. We were bedraggled enough that the story went mostly unchallenged. There were questions arising from the fact there were so many of us and that most weren't sailors. It would take a cruise ship to explain us and none had been reported missing recently, but our story was that we had been stranded for many years before finding a derelict ship. That was close enough to the truth that it was eventually accepted. Since we could claim the ship as salvage, I had Jason try to find a buyer for it. Even as scrap, the *La Mancha* was worth enough to allow us to readily equip for the next stage of the journey.

While Jason was making the necessary deals, I went about trying to find Paddy Yeats, Puerto Zapato's lone LSA agent. He was making himself scarce, I discovered, but I eventually tracked him down to a filthy tenement building near the warehouse district. He was pretty cautious when he opened his flimsy door a crack to see who was knocking, but he swung it wide open once he recognized me. Next to his pal Slisko, I was probably the one from the old Rubacava days he trusted the most.
"Calavera!" He exclaimed, before looking feverishly up and down the narrow stairwell behind me. "Come in, quickly." He said, giving me space. He then shut and bolted the door behind me. "Where the hell did you spring from, man? When your boat headed back out to sea and we heard the explosion…"

"Well, things got interesting after that." I replied, taking a seat by his rickety kitchenette table. "But first, what have you heard from Salvador lately?"

"Nada." Paddy said. "I sent along my report about the *Lola*, but I haven't gotten word back yet."

"What about Alexi and the gang?" I asked, figuring he'd at least have heard from them.

Paddy shook his head. "Rubacava's gone dark, man. You should know that."

"I've been out of the loop since I was made captain." I explained. "Too risky. I was hoping to reconnect once the *Lola* docked here."

"I'm mostly out of the loop myself." Paddy grumbled. "Things are getting very hot for the LSA in El Marrow, and I'm pretty sure the DOD here in Zapato know about me, too – so I've been laying low."

"Yeah, I almost couldn't find you." I pointed out. The newsies and derelicts I'd traced him through had seemed right enough, but still I'd had Glottis and a few others follow them up before I showed my face in this rough part of town. "So how long've you been in this rat hole, *carnal?*"

"Only the last few months." He said. "But what about you? What happened to the ship after you steamed out of port?"

"Well, she went down. I don't want to go into details, but I found out what happened to all those souls Hector stole Double-N tickets from. I have them with me and I'm going to try to get them to the end of the line."

Paddy stared open-jawed at me for a couple of seconds. "Wow… How'd you manage all that?" He said finally.

I shook my head firmly. "There's no time to explain, and I wouldn't even if there was. I want you to keep the little information I've told you to yourself for as long as you can – I don't want it getting back to Hector, somehow. It's not that I don't trust you, man…"

Paddy held up his hand when I trailed off. "You don't have to spell it out, man. Hector's intelligence is good, I know. So how long should I hold this back? I'll have to make a report eventually, if I can."

"If all goes right, it should take about a year to get to the end of the line on foot." I nodded, and gave the answer some thought. "I've got too many people to do any better than that. Give us two, maybe three months before you pass the news on to El Marrow. Once we're out in the wilderness, it doesn't matter what Hector knows. He won't be able to find us, much less stop us. When you make your report, tell Salvador that the Pearl is really the key. People don't jump overboard there – they're *thrown* overboard, and every one of them is a saint. The Pearl is the pickup point. From there, they're taken to a forgotten island on the southern edge of the world. I've done a lot of damage to the operation, but there's nothing to stop Hector from getting the system going again once he finds out what's happened."

"Now that we know about the Pearl, maybe we can intercept Hector's victims before they get that far!" Paddy said, ever optimistic.

"Maybe, but there's not much you can do on your own." I said hesitantly, not wanting to imply I didn't trust the man. "Are you *sure* there's nothing new from El Marrow?"

"The most recent news I sent to you by carrier pigeon when the *Lola* docked." Paddy answered, either not picking up on my worries or not really caring. "Everything else is so stale that it isn't really even worth telling anymore. Basically, the LSA is working hard in El Marrow but can't get any traction. Hector's just too powerful."

"Yeah, well…" I grumbled, getting up from the tiny table. "Hector *can* be hurt. When you tell Salvador about the Pearl and the edge of the world, you can also tell him that Domino Hurley is out of the picture… for good."

Jason found a buyer for the *La Mancha*. The amount looked pretty impressive, until we worked out what it came to per person. What we could afford to equip ourselves with for the next stage of the journey was barely adequate, but we couldn't afford the time needed to raise more money.
I figured we needed to be out of town before any of the local DOD on Hector's payroll got wise to who we really were, so we got the minimum of what we needed and set out.
And I thought the trip onboard the *La Mancha* was rough.
Once we got away from the coast the land became a flat plain, rising imperceptibly towards the mountains at the far distant edge of the world. The landscape became unbearably uniform; frozen white dust lay everywhere under the dull-grey emotionless sky. Terrain like this would have been tundra in the Land of the Living, but here there were of course no plants.
We trudged forward, mostly silent, watching our own feet march… the only entertainment. We went pretty numb after the first few weeks, and not only from the cold. There were occasional encounters with the demons native to the plain – hideous, monstrous and savage parodies of moose and bears – but after a while, evading and escaping these beasts became routine, and we never lost anyone. Everybody watched out for everyone else, and Glottis kept watch on us all.
Then we came to the ice and snow, and the demons became equally polar… although demon penguins were nothing compared with demon beavers, in my opinion anyway. The ground rose up to form low, broad hills at first. In time, mountains began to show faintly on the horizon, seeming not to grow any larger for weeks on end. But we did eventually come to the foothills, struggling up into the mountains themselves. We were about a year out of Puerto Zapato by this time, nearing the very end of our journey; but it seemed as if we had always been travelling like this and always would be. Some people just gave up, and had to be carried.

One day we looked up and saw the massive stone pillars we were approaching, marching in endless pairs towards the tallest peak of the mountain. Between the pillars stretched shimmering tracks. We stopped and stared in awe for a short while – the beautiful rails for the Number Nine train. We looked back down to our feet and moved onwards. When we reached the gigantic pillars we followed them up into the mountains… up to the massive Babylonian/Mayan/Aztec-style temple that loomed up against the very largest of them.
The end of the line.

Year Four

Chapter 40 – The Temple Station

We climbed the mountain, walking beside the pillars supporting the Number Nine's tracks. Finally, we approached the colossal steps to the temple summit that loomed before us. The enormous climb marked the final leg of our journey. Our group ascended, ever-so-wearily, to the large stone platform that lay just outside the summit near the arch through which the train passed.

There we encountered the Gatekeeper, a nameless soul who – for whatever reason – was condemned to remain at the entrance of the temple, ushering others through to the next world but never able to cross over himself.

One by one the former prisoners filed up to the Gatekeeper and gave their names. The Gatekeeper looked over his scrolls and directed each one of them into waiting area two, which lay just inside the entrance to the temple.

After an hour of listening to the same sentence over and over I grew fairly bored and started to look around. Something seemed wrong, but it was a while before I realized what it was.

Glottis was nowhere in sight.

I asked Meché if she'd seen him. She said she hadn't, so we handed Pugsy and Bibi over to the others and went looking for him. We backtracked down the mountain slightly and found a place where we could make out Glottis' footprints… which lay ominously beside an impression of his body in the snow, many other smaller footprints, and a large trench apparently made from his large frame being dragged away.

We exchanged worried looks and followed the track.

We followed the trail to a small stone building built into a shelf below the temple platform. Weird chanting noises could be heard from within.

A system of suspended cables running up the side of the mountain led inside, as did the tracks in the snow. We cautiously entered the structure and my attention was drawn to several bright-red objects.

"Gondolas!?" I exclaimed incredulously. "I *knew* we should have checked this side of the mountain before we walked up!"

"Oh, Glottis!" Meché cried, pushing past me and rushing forward. It was then that I saw him, lying motionlessly on the floor only a few feet away. Meché knelt beside him and struggled to take his giant hand in both of hers.

"Hear the name of the great one!" One of the little demons surrounding Glottis warbled. "Glottis!"

"Glottis…" The others began to chant. The bizarre thing – apart from the chanting – was that they all looked like tiny, miniature versions of Glottis.

"What's happening?" I demanded. Meché gave up on trying to lift Glottis' hand and settled on stroking his forehead instead.

"How many days has this grand demon gone without driving?" One of the little demons asked.

"We've been hiking for months!" I answered.

"*Months!?*" Another exclaimed in horror.

"Oh…" Yet another said, shaking his head sadly. "Then the noble one will surely die."

I felt my invisible stomach lurch. I didn't want to believe that, but I had to admit to myself that Glottis looked terrible, lying there on the floor, with ashen skin and unfocused eyes staring up at nothing.

Meché continued to stroke his forehead, but he didn't respond.

"I don't understand." I said shakily to the demons. "What's wrong with him?"

"Do you know the one purpose, the one skill, the one desire of this humble spirit?" He asked in return.

"Yes, but we've been so far away from cars and civilization for so long…"

"Why?" One wailed. "Oh, why did he ever leave his home??"

That was no mystery. "I… got him fired." I admitted sadly. "And then… Oh, Glottis! What have I done to you?" I felt tears coming on. I wondered then if Meché would blame me; I sure did. I went over to take a better look at Glottis. "How could I not notice this was happening?"

"Don't punish yourself *again*, Manny." Meché complained, looking over to me. "You weren't to know. Nobody saw this coming."

Glottis shifted his head slightly toward us, his dark-rimmed eyes struggling to focus.

"Manny…" He croaked. One giant paw reached out to me.

I took his hand in my own relatively small, skeletal hand. "Are you in much pain, my friend?" I asked him gently.

"Only because I let you down, Manny…" He started to cough, his eyes losing focus again. "Can't stop…" He went on in a slurred voice. "Must save… everyone…"

"What can we do?" Meché asked helplessly. "Won't anything help?"

"I need to race…" Glottis groaned. "To fly, like… in the old days… in the *Bone Wagon*…"

He emitted some more thick coughing.

"But the *Bone Wagon*'s not here, *carnal*." I said feebly.

"Maybe I'll see her… on the other side."

"You are *not* going to die." I insisted.

"The land calls back its children." He said slowly. "Who am I to say no?"

"Can't we make a new hotrod?"

"Those days are done, Manny…" He sighed, turning away and slipping once more into unconsciousness.

Meché and I looked helplessly at each other.

"What can we do?" I asked.

"Maybe we can only make him comfortable." She replied.

The demons stood around in respectful silence.

"I'm going to boil water." Meché suddenly declared.
"*Qué?*"
"He needs to be clean and warm." She clenched her fists tightly. "I can't think of anything other than keeping him comfortable, Manny. I'll need a tub or basin or something." She grumbled in frustration.
"Outside." One said. He made a move to fetch it for her, but Meché waved him away and ran out herself.
After she had left I got an idea.
"Are there any vehicles here that we could use to revive him?" I asked.
"Only the trucks that deliver the souls." One of the little demons answered sadly. "But they are slow…"
"So slow…" All the others repeated in unison.
There was a sudden loud clanging from outside.
"Manny!" Meché shouted.
I spun around towards the exit. "What is it?" I called out.
"Come and see!" She called back. I joined her outside and she pointed up to the stone temple. "Do you see anyone up there?"
I peered as hard as I could through the snowy glare and finally shook my head.
"No, I don't." I admitted.
"They all knew we went looking for Glottis." She said, sounding very worried. "You'd think at least a few would have waited. What do you think happened?"
"They're probably all in the next world by now." I said, not even convincing myself.
"Even Jason and Anton? And what about all that waiting room stuff? I've got a bad feeling about this, Manny." Meché said. "You'd better go up and see. I'll look after Glottis." She saw me hesitate. "*Manny…!*"
"Okay!" I said, finally moving towards the stairs. "But see if you can't find anything to help Glottis. We *can't* let him die."
That would be one more tragedy than I could take.
I began ascending the temple stairs again.

When I reached the Gatekeeper's platform, it was entirely empty except for the Gatekeeper himself.
I'm not sure why, but that didn't feel right, even discounting Meché's uncertain worries.
"Where is everybody?" I asked.
"Waiting area two." The Gatekeeper intoned solemnly.
I expected him to say more. When he didn't, I went on.
"How long do they have to wait in there?"
"Until they have tickets." He stated. "They were issued tickets on the Number Nine train and they don't have them now. The punishment for selling Double-N tickets is *very* severe."
"But they didn't sell their tickets!" I protested. "Their tickets were stolen!"
"By whom?"
"Hector LeMans stole them to sell to rich people who don't deserve them."

There was a long, low whistle in the distance behind me. The Gatekeeper stared emotionlessly behind me for a moment, before I realized what the noise was.
The Number Nine train.
"That may be them now." The Gatekeeper droned. "Let's see just what they deserve."
The train was still quite a long way off. I peered down the track, at first seeing only a speck, and then back at the Gatekeeper. He was gazing steadily at the distant train, content just to watch at wait. So we both did.
As the train grew closer, the switch at the platform crossing began to flash and ring, signalling the arrival of the holy express. I didn't notice right away, but the sound changed with each ring. It started out as a hollow clanging before turning into something more… ominous.
As soon as I began to notice the change in sound, I turned to see the switch quivering violently, gradually changing shape. Within the flash of a moment, it became a gnarled red arrow pointing straight down.
And then I heard the most unholy scream imaginable.
I spun back towards the train and saw its smooth metal skin peel away and vanish, leaving behind a dripping blood-red metal skeleton pulsating with deep flames and hot smoke. There seemed to be a leering face fixated on the front of the train with a sharp Vandyke-beard in place of a cow-catcher.
In mid-air beside the track, just below the platform and only meters from where I stood, a bright spot appeared… and rapidly grew into a huge disk of hideous flames.
The train began to rock viciously left and right, before tearing itself from the rails and diving into the menacing disk of fire with a loud screech.
The disk immediately curled in upon itself and vanished with a shrieking inhale…
And then there was silence.

In the sudden quietness I almost forgot the Gatekeeper was there.
I whirled around and stammered uncertainly. "What happened to that train!?"
"Your destiny cannot be purchased." He answered tonelessly.
"I don't understand…" I went on, feeling strangely satisfied. "So why has everyone been detained?"
"Given a ticket, a soul may not sell it." The Gatekeeper answered.
"But *they* didn't sell them!" I protested. "Someone else has… or is selling counterfeits, anyway. I'm not sure what happened to the tickets after they were stolen. You can't hold that against these people!"
"Bring the tickets." The Gatekeeper said dismissively. "That is all."
"The tickets must be in El Marrow!" I exclaimed helplessly. "I can't get there and back quickly enough…"
"These rails are already there." He replied.
"Thanks…" I said with biting sarcasm. "That helps a lot."
"The gate opens," the Gatekeeper went on, "and the gate closes. It does not 'help'."
I couldn't really argue with him, so I didn't bother trying.

I went through the arch below the Gatekeeper with the intention of finding the portentous-sounding waiting area two.

Through the grand arch was a train station; which only made sense since the Number Nine passed through there on its way to the next world. For some reason though, I still didn't expect it. I suppose natural stupidity explains my surprise.
The walls were full of giant murals depicting all the beauty and horrors of the Land of the Dead, including the stuff we didn't put in the brochures. Too bad we didn't have this back in El Marrow, I thought. There was even a ghastly depiction of the Number Nine jumping its tracks. That'd put a crimp on Hector's scam if people could see in advance what they were really getting with his phoney tickets.

I found a door marked with a large arrow and the words 'Waiting Area Two' inscribed boldly. I tried to enter the door, but I couldn't force my feet to move across the threshold. It's hard to explain, but I just physically could not do it. Something wouldn't let me go in.
"*That is I*." A voice echoed inside my skull. "*The Keeper of the gate*."
"I need to get my friends." I said aloud.
"*You need to get your friends their tickets*."
I grumbled to myself and turned away.
I walked further into the station, thinking maybe perhaps there was another way through; although even if there was, the Gatekeeper would probably stop me again.
As I looked around, I spotted some movement over to one side. There was another soul in the station, marching in a clockwise movement around the inside of a large display fountain. Weird.
When I approached, I recognized the familiar figure.
"Chepito!" I exclaimed. "How'd you get free?"
"I was born free, boatnik." He answered. "Nobody gave me no ticket, so nobody can take it away."
I should have realized that.
"So what are you pacing around here for?"
"Trying to unwind a little bit. All those years, circling around in one direction… gotta even out my life in this world before I go on to the next, you know." He chuckled slightly to himself at whatever he found funny, before suddenly stepping out of the fountain. "Well, that oughta do 'er."
Chepito brushed himself off and began to amble slowly towards the dark archway that lay opposite the one leading outside.
"Goodbye, Chepito!" I managed to call out after him.
"Happy trails, cap'n!" He returned. As he reached the archway, he turned slowly back to look at me. "Oh, and thanks for settin' me straight back there in the drink."
He gave a hearty wave and set off through the tunnel.

As I watched Chepito disappear into the dark tunnel, I heard him continue his melody that he first sung during his journey through the Sea of Lament.

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

It was truly an amazing moment. All those years as a reaper – sending people on to this very place, encouraging Lopez and others to move on – and this was the first time I'd ever seen anyone complete the journey. If only Membrillo could have seen it. If only Lola…
But I pushed that thought away.

I suddenly realized I was standing by the arch, staring into the deep blackness beyond that appeared as solid as a wall. There was no longer any sign or sound of Chepito, or of anything else. I was entirely alone in that place.
What was really through there? I had only to take one step forward to find out. Just one step, and it'd be all over. No more malevolent demons, no Hector threatening everything, no Lola haunting me.
To finally find peace, I simply had to put one foot in front of the other.

But I couldn't do it.
I turned around and marched painfully toward the entranceway arch.
I wasn't leaving this world without the people I had promised to save.

Chapter 41 – Rubacava or Bust... Again

I barely glanced at the Gatekeeper as I strode past.
"Recently…" He said before I reached the steps. "I was visited by a bird with a human head." I shivered at the image. "Do you know such a bird, Manuel Calavera?"
"No…" I replied, startled by the sound of my own name. "How did you—"
"He knew you." The Gatekeeper answered before I could finish the question. "And for you, he left this note."
He opened his hand and let a scrap of paper drift gently down to the platform. I picked it up and read it aloud.

> I know what you're up to. I've been watching. Stay there, I'm coming to sprout you myself.
>
> Yours truly,
> Hector LeMans

"*¡Hijole!*" I heard myself exclaim.
I stuffed the note back into my pocket and continued walking down to the gondola platform. When I got there, I was surprised and relieved to see Glottis half sitting up and scribbling on a piece of paper with a clipboard.
"He's had an idea." Meché whispered to me. "Something inspired by the gondolas. If it works…" She released a hopeful sigh. "What did you find out?"
"Your feelings were on the money." I whispered back. "Everyone's being held here until their tickets arrive. The Gatekeeper thinks they sold their tickets. I tried to explain, but he wants the tickets before he releases anyone."
I shook my head wearily.
"What are we going to do?" Meché hissed, sounding frustrated.
"Get the tickets, I guess. Somehow."
"Manny!" She said urgently. "It took us a *year* to walk here from Puerto Zapato, and it's *another* year to Rubacava. On top of that, we don't really know what happened to those tickets. These people here are our responsibility. We can't leave them in limbo, no matter what the Gatekeeper says."
Talk about hitting a man when he's down.
"I'm wide open to suggestions." I replied, shrugging helplessly.
Anger gathered in Meché's immobile features before turning into frustration.
"Haven't we been through enough!?" She snapped.
I couldn't think of an answer that would help.

Several minutes later, Glottis lay himself back down and dropped his pencil and clipboard with a clatter.
"There it is…" He wheezed painfully. "My final work. It could save me…"
There was a tense moment where he said no more, before his heaving chest told us he was merely unconscious.
One of the little demons picked up the clipboard while the others gathered around and chattered anxiously. I peered over their tiny shoulders to get a look.
"What is it?" Meché asked.
"It looks like plans for some kind of rocket sled." I answered. "They're brilliant!" I looked down at the little ones. "Hey gremlins, can you build this thing?"
"Perhaps." One answered.
"We have never attempted anything this powerful before." Another added.
"But could it save Glottis?" Meché asked hopefully.
"Yes." They all warbled at once.
"But we must have time." Another went on. "We have much to do."
"Okay." I said, turning to Meché. "Let's give them space."
I tugged on her sleeve to get her to follow me into the little workshop kitchen.
"We should stay with Glottis." She said.
"He's resting." I replied insistently. "And we're not going far."
She sighed and reluctantly followed.

Once inside the tiny kitchen, Meché busied herself by making coffee. I'd noticed that on the long trip here – the busier her hands were, the better she coped.

"Do you really think this rocket sled can save Glottis?" She asked.

"Sure." I replied. "He thrives on speed."

"But… how can speed keep him from dying?"

"Don't try to understand it. Remember what I told you about the time he ripped his heart out? And staying underwater for hours? A demon body just isn't like a human body."

"I hope you're right."

"We've got nothing if we don't have hope." I said positively.

Meché shot a surprised look at me. "Since when do *you* talk like that?" She asked.

I didn't realize I was out of character.

"I don't know… maybe it has something to do with the past year." I said.

"Maybe." She replied, shaking her head. "There were days when I was sure I couldn't put one foot in front of the other. But I did. It took a lot of faith to keep going."

"I think you're right." I nodded. "Funny, that doesn't sound so stupid anymore."

She just 'smiled' at me. "Hand me a couple of mugs."

"Sure." I said, picking two off the rack. Suddenly, I got silly. "It's the mug rack at the end of the world!" I droned in my best *Twilight Zone* voice.

Meché laughed at the joke, but then choked back a sob.

"Hey!" I said, taking her by the shoulders and giving her a little shake of encouragement. "Are you alright?"

I guess the stress of our journey had finally gotten to her in one heavy blow. After a minute or two she gently pulled away and rubbed her face.

"I'm sorry." She said.

"Don't be."

"I'm not sure where that came from."

"We've been under a lot of stress for a long time." I pointed out.

"I guess so." She finished before going back to her coffee.

When we were finished, we both felt far more secure in ourselves and ready to face… whatever it was we were facing.

The little demons were busy at work trying to make Glottis' idea a reality while Glottis himself seemed to gradually fade away.

Meché sat beside him while I felt useless.

"Go for a walk." Meché finally said.

"I'm staying right here."

"You're not doing any good by pacing around." She countered. "Work off some of that nervous energy. Talk to the Gatekeeper again, build a damn snow fort, but do *something*."

"Yeah, alright." I sighed, and marched out in a huff.

Once outside, I slowed right down. Meché was right. I couldn't just sit around impatiently like I had been, and I wasn't doing Glottis any favours. I didn't want to lock horns with the Gatekeeper's stubborn calm again, so I went for a long walk down the stairs of the temple, despite the fact that there was nothing but icy snow to be seen in every direction. Eventually, I came to a circular space at the base of the temple, near where the gondolas picked up newly arriving souls.
As I approached, a couple of black DOD trucks pulled in.
I hesitated for a moment, but the drivers barely glanced at me as they hopped out of their cabs and began unloading some bulky caskets.
I wandered over and watched the drivers open each casket one by one to release the souls inside. Each one looked around in the sudden light, clearly dazed from the journey, and then started climbing the large steps up to the top.
One casket in particular caught my attention. I recognized the handwriting on the label – it was mine.
The drivers ignored me as I opened up the casket.
In what felt like an incredible rush of déjà vu, the angry midget inside sat up and glared menacingly at me.
"*YOU!*" He exclaimed with both anger and surprise.
"*Bruno!?*" I blurted out. "Bruno *Martinez??*"
It was almost too ironic to be true.
"*You* were the one who packed me in there!" He accused, jumping out of the casket. "You could have at least given me a magazine! *Four years* with nothing to read but *<u>this</u> damn mug!*" Bruno growled as he flung the familiar white mug at me, which I caught. "What are you doin' here? And if you were headed this way, why didn't you offer me a lift!?" He demanded. "*Bah!*"
Bruno didn't wait for answers. Instead, he began trotting quickly up the stairs.
"I'm getting' outta here!" He snarled. "This world is for suckers!"
I noticed the drivers were staring at me. I just shrugged indifferently and walked away.

The mini demons worked all through the night on building the rocket sled. By early morning they were setting it up on the tracks by the Gatekeeper's platform. Glottis was looking terribly old and withered as they loaded him on top. He hadn't stirred since the day before, and now seemed to be in some sort of deep coma. I expected the Gatekeeper to raise some kind of objection as to what was going on, but he just sat there silently and stared off into nothingness.
When the demons had the sled in place, they brought up a gondola car and slung it underneath for Meché and myself to ride in.
A couple of the little critters helped us into the gondola as the others readied the sled.
"We shoot you now like an arrow into the wind!" They began to chant loudly. "May you pierce the heart of the wind itself and drink the blood of flight!"

Once we were inside the gondola and the door was secured, our helpers rejoined the others.

"Speed is the food of the great Glottis!" They all trilled. "Speed brings you life!"

The demons jumped back onto the platform and one picked up the remote control that would start the large rocket.

"Come back to us one day!" They warbled in unison.

Meché and I braced ourselves.

The rocket fired with a thunderous boom.

To my surprise we moved forward only slowly to begin with, but gradually building up speed. It wasn't long before the landscape became a blur of drab monotones.

We sped along the tracks, faster and faster as we rocketed above the snowy landscape below. The gondola shook slightly as the wind screamed past. Meché and I were forced to shout in order to hear each other. Late that same day we whipped past Puerto Zapato. I began to feel strangely enraged, although at what I wasn't sure.

We were over the ocean all through the following day. The gondola began to bounce and rattle even though the rails appeared to be perfectly even and smooth. Night fell quickly and things got even rougher.

"You sure this thing's going to hold together?" Meché shouted.

"Uh…" I stammered. Of course I wasn't sure – I didn't build it. I tried to be encouraging. "At least most of the way. Hey, look!" I pointed. "We're already to Rubacava!"

At first, I was surprised to look over and see that Meché appeared somewhat conflicted, until I realized she was looking towards the city where Domino had used her to lure me into his trap. Before she could say anything, the gondola suddenly began to sway far more violently than before. There came a new noise above the creaking and groaning of the carriage and the rush of the wind.

It sounded like a voice. I couldn't really make anything out, until the familiar voice rose to a loud scream.

"Manny!? I'm frightened!"

It was Glottis!

Before I could feel relieved however, the rocket sled gave another brutal shuddering and careened off the rails into the deep sea below.

Meché and I were thrown out of the gondola as we drifted down towards the ocean floor.

"Oh, no!" I heard her groan as we slowly sank. "Not again…"

The water was pitch-dark, but I could vaguely make out an even darker shape moving straight for us. Since we couldn't swim, we had no choice but to await the unknown creature. It reached out and grabbed Meché first, then me. But instead of being torn apart, we were both tucked under one arm as the heavy shape propelled us rapidly upwards.

"You're lucky I've got such good eyesight!" Glottis crowed once we'd broken the surface.

Chapter 42 – Old Stomping Grounds

Glottis swam towards the nearest shore of Rubacava's islands and set us down once we hit the rough bank.
Meché and I took a moment to regain ourselves, while Glottis appeared more delighted than ever.
"Ah, Rubacava!" He exclaimed, seemingly oblivious to everything that had just occurred. "What a town! Remember the glory days, Manny?"
"Long gone, my friend." I answered. "There's nothing here for us now."
"'Cept maybe our old car."
"You may be right." I said, feeling my spirits rise. "I sure hope so. It'll make the trip to El Marrow a lot easier."
"Not to mention the trip back." Meché added, wringing out her clothes as best she could.
"Well, once we get the tickets, you can take the train." I pointed out.
She didn't say anything to that.

When we were more-or-less dried out, we headed into town and found ourselves near the docks. From the look of things, we were in the area farthest away from where the *Bone Wagon* had been stored.
As we walked along the shadowy street, a rough voice quietly called out to me.
"Calavera…"
I jumped at the sudden mention of my name and spun toward the voice. But when I saw who was standing in the deep shadows near a dark storefront, I waved Glottis and Meché on.
"You guys go ahead. I'll catch up in a little while."
"Manny…?" Meché began.
"It's alright." I said calmly. "It's an old friend."
Meché and Glottis reluctantly went on while I walked over to where the figure was standing.
It was Toto Santos outside his scrimshaw parlour.
"So, you came back." He said, almost as an accusation.
"Just passing through." I countered. "I've got some business in El Marrow."
Toto huffed quietly. He turned to enter his shop, shooting a glance over his shoulder that told me to follow.

"Never thought I would see you again." Toto said once we were inside.
I didn't say anything. There was something odd about the way he was acting. His shop was even more of a mess than I remembered it.
"Imagine my surprise," he went on, "when I hear Naranja had been sprouted, and him passed out on my cot all the time."
"Well, mistakes happen." I replied, thinking that following Toto inside had perhaps been a dumb thing to do.
"Funny mistake." He growled. "You come into my shop, Naranja goes into deep sleep. Next day, they say he been sprouted and you gone away on *Limbo*. Very funny."

I kept quiet.
"Membrillo has his ID." Toto kept going. "Very, very funny."
"Yeah. Guess so."
Toto turned away and walked over to the counter. He picked up a dark bottle and took a long swallow. As he did this, I noticed his right arm. There was a huge chunk missing from the humerus, and I could even see part of the marrow.
"Toto…" I began.
"I don't see Lola for days." He interrupted. "No one see her. I ask questions, put pieces together."
"Toto," I said, "your arm… what happened to your arm?"
"Nick Virago." He growled.
"You confronted him about Lola?"
Toto nodded slowly.
"What'd he do, attack you with a meat cleaver?"
"He shoot me." He answered simply.
I felt both cold and angry. "How did you survive?" I demanded to know.
Toto opened a small cabinet and tossed me a tiny canister.
"Liquid nitrogen." He said over his shoulder. "Nick laugh and say I see Lola soon. Leave me to sprout. I pour this on wound, dig out Sproutella."
I shivered deeply.
I made to hand the canister back to Toto, but he waved his hand.
"Keep it. Maybe you need it." He huffed, before taking another long belt from his bottle. "Go now before I regret doing you this favour."
I nodded, understanding the implication. I turned to the door, but stopped before I opened it.
"You know, I didn't want any of that stuff to happen." I grumbled.
"I know it." Toto replied. "But still I hate you."
"Not as much as I hate myself." I admitted, stepping through the door and closing it tightly behind me.

I quickly walked away after Glottis and Meché, looking back occasionally. Just in case.
I caught up with them before long – they had been dawdling.
"What happened?" Meché asked.
"Oh, Toto just wanted to… talk over old times." I answered.
"I can tell when you're lying, Manny." She scolded.
"I don't want to talk about it, alright?" I snapped, instantly regretting my bad temper.
"Well, just say so." Meché managed to sound acerbic and sympathetic at the same time.
"Okay, okay." I groused.
We walked on in silence for a while.
"There's the lighthouse." I pointed. Meché shot me an understanding look.

We finally reached the miniature warehouse where the Bone Wagon was stored, unless Velasco or someone had moved it.
Glottis heaved on the doors with all his might, but they didn't budge.
"I think they're stuck." He said sheepishly.
Before I could think of a wise-ass remark, Glottis pulled again and the doors moved open with a metallic shriek.
"Rusty." I said.
"Yeah. I guess no one's been in here for a while."
Glottis yanked the doors fully open and we all went in.
And there it was – the *Bone Wagon* lay dormant underneath a heavy dust-tarp which Glottis quickly removed. It was still as beautiful and fresh as the day we left it there.
"I'd better check the engine." Glottis whispered. "It'll probably take a little work to get her running good again."
"If she's just been sitting here for the past two years, yeah." I agreed.
"I've *always* wanted another ride in this car." Meché said, gently stroking the *Bone Wagon*'s headlights as Glottis started tinkering.
"Hey, Manny!" Glottis exclaimed. "C'mere! I don't think these wires belong here."
I walked over and looked to where he was pointing, then sprawled myself out to look underneath the car. "There's a nasty-looking bulge down here. Let's see if that flashlight still works." I noted, sitting up and taking a look around.
Meché looked to where I was pointing, grabbed the flashlight and tossed it to me. I snagged it out of the air and found that it still worked. I shined it underneath the *Bone Wagon* and got a good look at the lump attached to the engine.
"Fiendish…" I whispered, almost admiring the filthy thing. It was a miniature parcel of plastic explosives, wired to detonate the instant the engine was fired up. "There's a mercury switch, too. If we start up the engine, boom, and if we shift this beast any, still boom."
Glottis went pale. To him, the *Bone Wagon* was more like a lover than a car.
"Looks like Domino left his calling card." I groused.
"But… *how?* I saw him torn to shreds!" Meché exclaimed. She quickly glanced over at Glottis, who showed no reaction.
"He must have done this on his last trip through town." I said. "Now I know what he meant by the *Bone Wagon* looking 'dangerous'. That guy sure takes the prize." I shook my head angrily.
"I guess it's lucky you guys didn't go for a drive after he did this." Meché shivered.
"Not luck." I frowned. "More like bad timing on his part."
"Yeah." Glottis agreed. "I usually took the *Bone Wagon* out on Mondays."
"And the *Lambada* sailed on a Wednesday." I added.
"And you left on the *Limbo* on Friday." Meché finished. "Well, maybe he was just hedging his bet. If you didn't take the bait, he'd take you out of circulation this way."
"That's probably it, sweetheart." I nodded. "Trouble is…"
"…that doesn't solve our problem." Glottis said, finishing my thought.

"No kidding." I sighed, feeling exasperated. Not with Glottis or Meché, but with the whole damn situation. "We don't dare fiddle with those wires while the switch is there. The *Bone Wagon*'s too close to the ground for any of us to crawl under and remove the switch… and we can't jack up the car or raise it on the shocks with the switch still there."
I was even more baffled by how the heck a guy like Domino managed to get the explosives under there in the first place.
"Great." Meché said. "So now what? Do we take a bus?"
"We can't leave things like this, Manny!" Glottis protested.
"I agree." I said. "If we don't take care of this somehow, we'll be responsible for whatever happens down the line."
"So… how *do* we take care of it?" Meché asked after a slight pause.
"How did Mr. Hurley ever fit this thing in the first place?" Glottis wondered out loud.
"The switch was probably useless until the wires were attached." I concluded. "My guess is that they don't just set off the bomb if the engine is started – they also complete the circuit the switch needs to work."
I saw the questioning look Meché was giving me.
"Carla." I answered, not waiting for the question. "She learned about bombs as part of her job." I gave a brief shrug. "She liked to talk shop."
When she wasn't griping about Meché, that is.
"So, maybe Miss Ashburn could help us." Glottis suggested, in his usually formal way. "She's smaller than Miss Colomar, you know."
"We didn't part on good terms." I said, in my usually sarcastic way.
"Neither will our arms and legs if we don't take care of this thing." He retorted anxiously.
"I'll try the Blue Casket." I decided.
Meché stopped me before I got to the doors. "Why there?"
"Well, if my old gang is still around, that's the best place to start looking for them. If they can't cope with this, they'll know someone who can. And if I can't find them…" I shrugged. "Well, I always got the feeling there was more to Olivia than she let on."
"She was probably just putting on an act." Meché mumbled.
"Yeah, well so was I. Be back soon." I looked at Glottis. "Don't sneeze."
"Heh."

I started walking to the Blue Casket – assuming it was still there. I kept looking around, and especially behind me. Not for Toto; but for what I didn't know. Something seemed a little off about the place. It took a while, but I finally figured it out – there weren't nearly enough people. It wasn't that late yet, which meant there should have been quite a crowd outside.
But there wasn't.
I could see the lights of the cat track and the roar was as loud as ever.
Max was still in business, at least.

The Day of the Dead was over for this year, so everyone who had visited their families ought to be back by now. The town should have been absolutely jumping, but just wasn't.
It was pretty damn weird.

My route back to the Blue Casket took me past Velasco's office. The old buzzard was lounging around outside his door, smoking his pipe and staring silently up at the moon.
He did a blatant double-take when I came into view.
"Manuel Calavera!?" He exclaimed, before starting to laugh heartily. "Well… what happened to the *Limbo*?"
"Oh, I hate to tell you Velasco, but she went down at the Pearl."
I didn't feel up to telling him about the name change.
"Sorry to hear that, son. She was a good boat."
"Things are kinda quiet around here." I said, walking over to his grubby perch.
Velasco shifted his position uncomfortably. "Yeah."
"The Blue Casket still in business?"
"Sure." Velasco answered. "That Ofrenda dame's part of the furnishings, you know?"
"So, does Alexi's little gang still hang out here?" I tried to ask casually.
There was a slight pause before Velasco answered. "Well, I ain't heard much about 'em since the strike." He finally said. "Some folks say they lit out for El Marrow to stir up trouble there. Can't say for sure, though."
"Yeah, I heard a little about that strike aboard the ship. It got pretty nasty, going by what the papers said."
"Worst trouble I'd ever seen in my time, son. They clamped down *hard*."
Velasco looked around in a cautious-seeming way. His discomfort couldn't have been more obvious.
"A mite *too* hard, you could say." He growled in a softer tone.
I sat down on a barrel near Velasco. Even though the *Bone Wagon* was a crisis, I needed to know the current scene – and I didn't much like what I was hearing so far.
"I ran into Toto on the way over." I said. "He didn't look so good."
"He never was very pretty." Velasco chuckled, before releasing a haggard sigh. "But I know what you mean, son. He's had a rough time of it since you blew outta town. He found out about Lola, and…" He shrugged. "Well, I guess he had some real feelings under that 'Papa Toto' act of his. He's been hiding out from Virago, so his business has slid a little; but he's really gone downhill the last few days."
"Yeah? Why's that?"
"Oh, well Virago left town for El Marrow. Rumour has it he bought himself a golden Double-N ticket and steamed on out of this rat-hole of a world."

I couldn't help but burst out laughing. I don't know how long I went on for, but once I began I simply couldn't stop. Velasco stared at me as if he thought I'd gone nuts. I didn't care – maybe I *was* nuts.
The train I had seen jump the tracks was taken by Virago himself.
"That's just *perfect!* " I said, repressing yet more laughter. "That's the best damn news yet! You can tell Toto the next time you see him… I have it on the very best authority that money can't change your destiny."
"Yeah? What kind of authority?" Velasco asked, sounding merely curious.
"I've been to the end of the line." I answered. "And I've even seen what happens to people who are stupid enough to *buy* Double-N tickets."
"So then why'd you come back here for?" Velasco gave a short, sharp laugh. "Did'ja leave the gas on, or somethin'?"
"I'm trying to help some people out." I said. "I finally found them after the *Limbo* went down. They were kind of stranded. Still are, in a way."
"Stranded? As in *shipwrecked?!* " Velasco snapped. "How'd you get 'em out with the *Limbo* sunk?"
"We found a new ship, the SS *La Mancha*, and managed to—"
Velasco suddenly got VERY animated. "*La Mancha?* " He asked excitedly. "My old rusty bucket!? Where is she?"
"Oh, well we sold her in Puerto Zapato and—"
"That does it!" Velasco exclaimed, knocking out his pipe and stuffing it in a pocket. "I'm out of this stinkin' mob town!"
He began to stride away before I could react.
"But…" I stammered. "I… *mob* town?"
"Thanks for saving my baby, Manny!" Velasco called to me over his shoulder. "Puerto Zapato, here I come!"
I stood up slowly and shook my skull as he vanished from sight.
It was good to see another familiar face making their way a little bit closer to the end of the line.
Within a few moments, I was continuing on my way to the Blue Casket.

The joint didn't look any different from the outside than I remembered.
And yet, somehow, it did. I couldn't put my finger on it, but each minute I was getting more and more uncomfortable with Rubacava.
I didn't much like the feeling.
I hauled open the heavy doors to the nightclub. I'd had enough practice in the old days that they no longer gave me any trouble. I went inside and was almost immediately knocked down by the silence.
No bands, no poets, no customers. Just dark, blue, and WAY too empty.
"Silent as the grave…" I said out loud to what I thought was myself.
"Calavera!" A nearby voice exclaimed. I jumped at the sound.
I looked around and saw Olivia sitting at a table with papers and an adding machine spread out in front of her.
"What *are* you doing here?" She asked, sounding almost as surprised as I felt. "I heard you went *pow* in Zapato, daddy-o."
"Well, Hector LeMans tried and missed." I said, walking over to her. "So now it's my turn. I'm headed to El Marrow to put him out of business."

"That place has *changed*, man." Olivia cooed, shaking her skull sadly. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."
I sat down at the table opposite her. "*This* town has changed, too. What the hell happened?"
"Well, it started with that strike, Cal. The Man hammered the Sea Bees, your boys bugged out, and the whole town got trimmed."
"*My* boys?" I asked, trying to fake her.
"Hey, don't be coy." She chided.
I shrugged, giving up on the old pretence. "So what happened to the 'boys'?"
"No idea. Skipped town. Taken for a ride, for all I know." She shrugged herself.
"So why's it so quiet around here?"
"Past curfew, daddy."
"*Curfew?*" I shook my skull in disbelief. "Who's in charge of this place now?"
Olivia threw back her neck and laughed. "Take a guess."
"Hector?"
"Well, Maximino runs the town…" She corrected me. "But he's Hector's tool alright."
"Which explains why the track is still hopping when nothing else seems to be." I added. "But what about you? I would have thought *you'd* be exempt from anything the Man laid down."
"I gave Max the air." Olivia said with a throaty, dark growl. "He's not the big boy he used to be. Not that it really matters; most of the nightlife has gone to El Marrow anyway."
"El Marrow? Are you kidding me?" I laughed. "*That* stuffy government town?"
"Hey, man!" She snapped. "I told you – things have changed."
"So why are you still here in Rubacava?" I asked. "Why not follow the crowd to El Marrow?"
"All my best customers are here, man. I've got… responsibilities, if that's the right word. I've still got a decent business going here, even if I do have to close up early." Olivia shrugged again. "Or maybe I'm just in a rut."
"So how long *have* you been here, anyway?"
She took a deep drag on her cigarette. Still used the holder. "A woman never tells her age, Manny."
"You're dead." I pointed out. "That's as old as anyone ever gets."
Olivia gave another small shrug. "It's tradition. Deal with it." She knocked the ash off the tip of her cigarette. "Tell me, why are you looking for Alexi, anyway?"
"Car trouble." I said.
Olivia laughed coldly. "*Social* engineering was his bag. What's happened to Glottis?"
"It's not his kind of problem. There's a bomb under the engine and the *Bone Wagon*'s too low to the ground for any of us to squeeze under. It's wired to the starter and it's got a mercury switch for good measure."
"Well…" She went on after a second or two of silence. "Who thinks enough of you to do that?"

"Ever met a guy called Domino Hurley?"

"Hmm…" She said, thinking. "Yeah, I think so. A big guy, community-college type with ivy-league airs?"

I laughed. "Yeah, that's him."

"Yeah, he was in here once or twice asking questions." Olivia nodded, reminiscing. "Years ago. He wasn't welcome."

"I always said you had style."

She 'smiled'. "I've got it all, daddy. Including a tight little body that can get into *any* position."

"Well, this is a pretty dangerous 'position'."

"You haven't met some of my boyfriends. Anyway, if the scene is what you say it is, then you just need that switch snipped off without any jostling and then Glottis can deal with the rest."

"That's about the size of it. Unless there are any other surprises I didn't notice. But… I can't really ask you to risk yourself. I was hoping Alexi or someone he knows could help us out. Or maybe Carla—"

"Believe me, you *don't* want to see *her* again." Olivia interrupted. "And don't worry about me, Manny. I can handle bombs – I've had plenty on my stage. But I have a price."

"What's that?" I asked cautiously.

"Take me with you."

"Why would you want to go to El Marrow?" I wondered aloud. "You just said—"

"You're not the only one with a score to settle in El Marrow, man. And I meant what I said about that place changing. You don't know the setup there, but I do. You need me."

I suppose I did, at that. She was probably right about Carla, and she was telling me the same thing about Alexi that Velasco had. If he had to skip town, things would be getting pretty hot for me once word got out that I was back.

"Yeah, okay." I decided. "You can come along if you want to."

I took Olivia back to the *Bone Wagon*. There were the quick introductions, and Olivia seemed to smile teasingly at Meché.

"So, you're that ghost-chick Manny's been chasing after."

"I guess I am." Meché returned coolly.

"Olivia thinks she can take care of that switch." I told Glottis. "Alexi isn't around here anymore."

"He had some sense after all." Olivia giggled. "I'll need something to cut out that switch, Glottis. And that flashlight."

Glottis tossed her the flashlight and a pair of wire clippers.

Olivia crouched down and shined the light under the car.

"Hmm…" She sighed to herself. "Tight squeeze. Fortunately, I've lost some weight." Olivia lay on her back and, ever-so gingerly, started to scoot underneath. "Okay." She said after a few minutes. "I can definitely reach the switch. Looks like a simple piece of work. Anybody who wants to had better scat now. Ready? Here we go…"

There were two quiet snicks, and then the mercury switch came rolling out from under the car.

"Good work." I said. Glottis released his breath and wiped his forehead.

"Glottis, you can take care of those wires now." Olivia called out.

"I think you should come out first, Miss Ofrenda." He replied.

"Actually…" She said, sounding embarrassed. "I'm stuck."

Meché started to laugh.

Glottis removed the wires from the starter and yanked them out. We then made the *Bone Wagon* rise up on its shocks and Olivia crawled out.

"One of you brave boys can get that nasty thing out of there. I'm done being a hero, cats." She huffed, standing up quickly and carefully brushing herself off. "Yuck. Grease everywhere."

"And all over your best turtleneck, too." Meché said.

"This old thing? Don't be silly." Olivia gave up using her hands. "Well, I'd better change anyway. Don't leave without me."

She walked over to the doors.

"Without… you?" Meché asked, sounding more than a little suspicious.

"If you're going after Hector LeMans, then I'm coming along." Olivia said defiantly. "Call it… my fee for services rendered."

She laughed happily and skipped away.

Meché glared at me. There was more than a little bad blood between those two.

Chapter 43 – The Road to El Marrow

Glottis got the *Bone Wagon* ready to roll, changing the oil and doing the other little things that needed to be done. Most of them, anyway. He was a little worried about the condition of the tires, for one thing – but there was nothing he could do about them at this time of night and we had to get rolling right away.

There was a garage at a road stop half an hour out of Rubacava on the main highway and Glottis planned to do a more thorough job on the car once we got there.

Olivia returned before Glottis had finished. Meché looked noticeably annoyed as Olivia walked in again, dropping a small case next to the car before making a production out of sticking a cigarette into her holder and lighting it. She blew the first puff toward Meché and shot a sly 'grin' in my direction.

When Glottis started putting away his tools, Olivia got close to me.

"These long trips can be *so* dull. Well, at least we'll have plenty of time to catch up, won't we Manny?"

She laughed quietly and nudged me with her hip.

"You can share a seat with me." Meché said quickly, picking up Olivia's case and tossing it into the passenger seat.

"Thanks." Olivia replied, walking over to the *Bone Wagon* again.

As she brushed by Meché, I'm fairly sure I heard Olivia 'meow' very softly.

"Are we ready to go, *carnal?*" I asked Glottis, trying to change the subject. Whatever it was.

"In a minute. I can't find my socket wrench."

"The one in your hand?"

He turned a little purple. "Oh, yeah." Glottis put it in his toolbox and stowed it in the car. "Well, I guess we're as ready as we're gonna be."

He climbed up behind the wheel.

I climbed up to my old seat – the absurd 'throne' on the rear of the car, and Meché held up our coats.

"Here." She said. "Keep these with you."

Meché kept her eye sockets fixed on Olivia until she got into the passenger seat and tucked her suitcase under her feet. Meché followed, wedging herself in beside Olivia.

Glottis made sure we were all settled, and then fired up the heavy engine.

"Alright!" He crowed. "Time to suck up some road!"

"Gonna be a long trip…" I said quietly to myself as the *Bone Wagon* peeled out from the docking area and sped through the streets of Rubacava.

Glottis retained a moderate speed once we got onto the highway.

Moderate for him, that is.

As we rolled along I could see him occasionally peer around at the wheels. That worried me a little, but I knew Glottis was a perfectionist. If he actually thought that the tires would lose their treads or blow out, we wouldn't have been on the road at all.

When we got to the stop we were aiming for it was just a little after three in the morning. The garage was still closed, of course, so we all trooped into the diner.

It was the first real meal Meché and I had eaten for nearly a year, even counting the coffee and donuts we had at the temple. What food we had on the journey from Puerto Zapato was solely for Glottis, since he was the only one who actually needed to eat, and there hadn't been much of that. He pretty much pigged out in that diner. I didn't blame him.

When he finally finished, he leaned back in the booth with a sigh, a stupid grin dominating his face and both hands on his newly-bulging stomach.

I sank into a deep funk. This was how the trip *from* El Marrow had started all those years ago – an early morning stop in a greasy spoon-diner, served by a tired and sullen waitress, with grim conversations about our current situation. It was like going back in time… and I honestly wished I could. I'd tell Lola to stay the hell away from Rubacava.

Meché saw the way I stared at the waitress doing busy work around the counter; she sighed quietly and gently patted my hand, but I pulled away. Olivia must have made the connection, because she actually kept quiet for a while.

When I finally snapped out of it, I distracted myself by getting Glottis to go into the details of what he needed done to the *Bone Wagon*.

He was only too happy to oblige.

Shortly before daylight came, the owner of the garage arrived and greeted Glottis with an enthusiastic "Dude!" I guessed they knew each other, probably from when Glottis had been cruising between El Marrow and Rubacava looking for Meché.
Glottis told the grease monkey what we needed, and within the hour they got to work on the *Bone Wagon*. Olivia wandered off for a while, saying she wanted to take a long walk, while Meché and I spent the time lounging around the garage and diner. I took to watching the lanes of traffic speeding up and down the twin ribbons of asphalt.

"Hey, Meché." I said after a while. "Do you see anything funny about those cars going by?"
Meché looked over the highway for a time, possibly just to be polite. "Not especially." She finally admitted, turning a questioning look at me. "Why?"
"Well, where are they going?" I asked. "Most of them, I mean."
She looked again, before giving a helpless shrug. "El Marrow, I guess."
"Yeah." I said. "Kind of strange."
"If you say so, Manny."
I realized I probably wasn't being all that clear.
"Most people who are in El Marrow are there because they have no other choice." I explained. "When I was there, most of the traffic was going *away* from the city. Usually only people travelling on DOD business ever went the other way."
"I see your point." Meché nodded. "So what's different now, do you think?"
"I don't know." I admitted.
"But you've got suspicions, huh?" She shrugged. "Well, let's go hang out near the pumps. When someone stops, we can ask them."
"Why didn't I think of that?"
"It's too straightforward for you." She giggled wickedly.
"Ouch." I said. There was too much truth in her joke.
"Hey, what's this?" She asked, pointing to something on my jacket.
"What?" I asked, looking down.
Her hand flew up as she poked me in the nose hole. Obvious as it was, the childish joke was still enough to break the tension.
She jumped away when I made a grab for her. Meché ran, laughing all the way, toward the pumps when I chased after. She jumped between them in a playful way, but suddenly stopped running.
She shook her head sadly, kicked at the dusty ground, and slowly walked toward the garage.
She wasn't playing anymore.
"What's wrong?" I asked, trailing in her sad wake.
"It doesn't seem right, having fun while all our friends are prisoners in that waiting room."
"Well get 'em out." I assured her.
"How can you be so sure?" She asked anxiously.
"Well, I can't." I admitted. "I'm just determined."

"So is that Salvador Limones you keep talking about. Tell me, how long has *he* been trying to fix things? And what makes you think *you* can just breeze into town and straighten everything out?" Meché released a heavy sigh. "Your friend Paddy was in hiding and your Rubacava gang seem to have disappeared. Maybe there *is* no LSA anymore."

"I don't want to believe that."

"Nobody ever fed Caesar to the lions." She sighed.

"Well, you're cheerful today." I grumbled.

"I'm tired, Manny; tired of running and hiding, fighting and giving up on fighting, and…" She trailed off and exhaled deeply.

"Yeah?" I snarled, but not really at her. "Well, I'm angry! I'm fed up with the whole damned mess, so Hector had better just watch out!"
Meché looked at me for a moment in complete silence. I sensed some of her despair turn into something grim and hard.

Before our conversation could continue, a car slowed down and turned off into the road stop. It pulled up to the pumps and the soul driving it climbed out. Meché walked over as the soul started filling up his gas tank. I followed.

"Where're you headed?" Meché asked.
The soul looked up. "You folks having car trouble?" He asked. "I can give you a lift, if you want."

"It's in the shop here." I replied as politely as possible. "Should be done soon. We're just curious."

"We're *bored*." Meché contradicted.
The guy chuckled. "This does look like a pretty dull spot, at that. Well, I'm going to El Marrow myself. And you?"

"Isn't that the wrong direction?" I asked. The car he was driving looked like one of the models the DOD used for the car package, which fit with his open helpfulness.

"Well, it'd take months to get to the Ninth Underworld by car. I've heard it's possible to buy Double-N tickets now. So why spend months when I can make the trip in days?"

"*Buy* a Double-N ticket?" Meché asked, affecting puzzlement. She was learning to be sneaky; my bad influence, I hoped. "That can't be right."
The guy just shrugged. "I've heard it from several sources, some of which I know I can trust. Believe me, I've heard right."
He had obviously missed Meché's subtle point.

"So, how does that work?" I asked indifferently. "Buying a ticket, I mean."
The guy placed the hose back on the pump and screwed the cap back on his tank. "I'm not sure, exactly. There's some official somebody-or-other you have to go through. I'm sure I'll learn more about it once I get back to the city." He stepped past us and went over to the garage to pay. "Pardon me."
Meché and I slowly walked toward the diner.

"That guy got the car package." I said.

"That's one of the premium packages, right?" Meché asked.

"Close. Second only to the luxury cruise and train." I answered.

"Wow, then Hector's *really* getting his message out, huh?"

"You said it, angel." I grumbled. "That guy had we just spoke to had it *made*. I wonder how far he got before he fell for it?"

"If he gets on the train…" Meché asked slowly. "Do you think he'll end up like those others you saw?"

"Probably." I answered without hesitation.

That hellacious punishment I'd witnessed was fine for the likes of Nick Virago, but not for the man we'd just met.

"A few months…" Meché pondered to herself. "He could be there in just a few months, maybe less." She shook her head. "Is that so bad?"

"Sounds like a good deal to me." I said, shaking my head.

"But what can we do?" Meché asked, sounding worried. "If he gets on that train, he'll never—"

"Well what *can* we do?" I retorted. "Tie him up? Sit on him? He's just one person, and only a potential victim at that. Maybe he doesn't have enough money. Maybe he won't make the right connections. Anyway, there's no point trying to stop just one guy… not unless it's Hector."

"When the *Bone Wagon*'s is finally fixed, we can probably get to El Marrow first." Meché went on thoughtfully. "Maybe we can deal with Hector before any more people can be victimized."

"You sure we can do that?" I asked.

"No." She answered firmly. "But I'm determined."

It was late in the afternoon before the *Bone Wagon* was ready. Glottis and his pal had changed the tires and lubed, cleaned, repaired and replaced whatever needed it. I couldn't see much of a difference, but Glottis said the car was perfect again. Olivia had turned up before this time, so when Glottis rolled the *Bone Wagon* out of the garage we were ready to pile in and hit the road again.

"Okay, *mano*." I said as I climbed into my seat. "Open her up wide. Let's not waste any time."

"Check." He gave a small salute. "Everybody strapped in?"

Glottis gave a hollering "*Yeeeeee-haaaaawww!!* " as we tore out of the road stop and back onto the highway.

We made pretty good time, but not the best. There was too much traffic for Glottis to really give the *Bone Wagon* its full head of steam.

"This is weird, Manny." He said when we were at a stop. "It wasn't like this the last time I was out this way."

"Last time," I noted dismally, "Hector wasn't openly selling Double-N tickets."

Olivia had obviously overheard our conversation, and tore open a packet of beef jerky she had bought at the diner. "They're not all going to El Marrow to buy tickets." She said, lighting up a cigarette with her free hand.

"How do you know?" I asked, passing a piece of jerky to Glottis and holding out my hand for a cigarette.

"El Marrow's the *in* place to be, man." She replied, handing me the coffin nail she'd already lighted and getting herself another out of a tin.

"That's hard to believe…" I mumbled after taking a puff.

"I keep telling you, Manny." She said in a sharp tone. "That burg has *changed*."

"Yeah, I know. It's not that I don't believe you, but I was there for a long time. 'The in place' just isn't how I think of it."

"I hear you, daddy." Olivia laughed. "It's not where the action is for cats like you and me."

She took a long drag on her cigarette, smoke swirling up and down the empty space in front of her neck vertebrae before she exhaled through her jaws.

"But it sounds like you've been there enough to know what it's like." Meché said after having given her piece of jerky a few nibbles.

Glottis had already swallowed what I'd given him in one gulp.

"Well, I've got a few friends there and sometimes Rubacava's new stuffiness gets to me." Olivia went on. "Sometimes I need to get away and see what I'm not missing."

"So what is it you're not missing?" I asked.

"You'll see." She said, sounding sly.

She pocketed several jerky strips and gave the rest to Glottis.

We eventually got going again, keeping on the move as long as possible and stopping only when we needed gas or when Glottis was too tired to go on. He was still a little weak from his brush with death, so he needed to rest more often than I would have liked.

When we finally reached the Petrified Forest, Meché kept her head down as the highway carried us through. Night fell quickly as we came to the edge of the forest, and Glottis pulled off the highway and out onto a road that ran through the edge of the city. We wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. When El Marrow was clearly visible, Glottis brought the car to a stop.

The four of us sat there, staring at the city as it glowed garishly ahead – and then, I understood why Olivia had been so mysterious about how El Marrow had changed. No words could have done justice to it.

The city was a sea of neon lights that dwarfed the Las Vegas strip.

"Looks like Hector's taken over the whole town." I said, feeling both amazed and appalled.

"He hasn't had much resistance." Olivia told us. "There's only one small group who oppose him, and they hide out on the fringes of the city."

"In places like this, you mean?"

"Yeah…" She began, but then stopped when she saw what I saw.

A ring of armed men surged around the car, surrounding us completely. They were all masked and dressed in full camouflage-gear. We put our hands up, startled by the sudden appearance of so many strangers.

One of the men stepped forward. I took him to be the leader.

"I'm Calavera." I said, trying to sound formal.

"Prove it." The man ordered.

"Okay." I shrugged. "How?"

The man pondered for a couple of seconds, and then stepped closer, tugging down the bandana that covered the lower-half of his face.

"Who am I?" He asked.

It was pretty dark, but…

"Gunnar!" I exclaimed. "Where you toying with me, man?"

"Well, I had to be sure." He said. "But I recognized the *Bone Wagon*, of course. Hello, Glottis."

Glottis shook his head. "Scared me to death…" I heard him mutter under his breath.

I jumped down from the *Bone Wagon* to the ground.

"So *this* is where you got to." I said.

"Rubacava got a little too hot for us, but I expect you know all about that by now. What about you, brother? What happened after Zapato?"

"Long story." I answered. "But I need to see Salvador first."

"No doubt." Gunnar nodded. He waved one of the men over. "I'm going to take Calavera back to base. You cats carry on."

The agent nodded and led the other men away.

"Okay then." Gunnar went on. "We're going to have to go down into the sewers. There's a main line that opens up not far from here. We can take the *Bone Wagon* in most of the way, and then we will continue on foot."

Gunnar explained to Glottis in detail where to go, and then he joined me in the main seat.

Glottis cautiously drove off in the direction Gunnar had indicated. Meché looked very anxious and Olivia seemed mildly amused. We came to a broad, shallow gully leading up into a large concrete tunnel that emerged from the side of a hill.

Glottis followed Gunnar's directions until, about half an hour later, we entered a large chamber with several smaller tunnels branching off it. Glottis stopped the car and Gunnar jumped down to meet the two souls who approached us. After speaking quietly with them, one ran off down a tunnel while the other moved to a position in the tunnel behind the *Bone Wagon*.

"It's only a short way now." Gunnar said. "But Glottis will have to remain here – the passages get too small for him beyond this point."

Chapter 44 – Back in the Loop

As Gunnar led us into the LSA headquarters, Meché looked anxiously over to me.

"I hope they won't hurt Glottis." She whispered.

"*Ha!*" Olivia scoffed. "Shows what you know about this group. Their leader is a great man who—"

Before she could finish, we then came into another chamber, full of tables, electronic gear and a pigeon coop.

Standing around a large table in the middle of the room was the soul who ran on ahead of us, several other LSA agents, plus Eva and Salvador Limones.

"Manuel Calavera." Salvador said in greeting, walking over to me with his hand outstretched. I clasped it in return as he went on. "I see you have found what you were looking for. How fortunate for you to arrive now, just as we too are about to achieve success. Our army has grown, and right now our top agents are in Hector's weapons lab about to close in on the enemy in his own den. I couldn't have done it without you, Manuel."
The handshake apparently inadequate, Salvador's reserve melted momentarily and he pulled me into a back-thumping embrace.
Before anything more could be said, a ragged voice from behind us suddenly alerted the room.
"*Trap!!*"
We all spun around toward the entrance to see an agent lurching through, tendrils of glistening green pushing their way through his fatigues, spreading rapidly upwards.
"It was a trap!" He repeated, collapsing on the floor with an exhausted wheeze.
"Stand back!" Salvador commanded, snatching a fire axe from its place on the wall. "There's only one thing to do!"
Without hesitation, Salvador plunged the axe down upon the fallen agent. Meché gasped in horror and turned away.
The sharp blade splintered the soul's spine and ribcage, separating the left-hand side from the rest of him. Salvador seemed pleased. Meché looked sick. Olivia, curious.
The separated, still-unsprouted portion of the soul pushed itself up by his left arm – the only remaining limb – and miraculously, began speaking to Salvador as if nothing had happened.
"Thank you, *sir*!"
"What did you say about a trap?" Salvador demanded.
"Hector uncovered our agent in his weapons lab." The soul reported.
"*No!*" Salvador exclaimed, dropping the axe.
He rushed over to a small bank of electronic equipment adorning one wall of the chamber and switched on a monitor.
It flickered into life, the grainy image showing a dingy little room where a small man dressed like a hippie gardener cowered before an enormously obese man wearing a fez.
"Idiot, Bowlsley!" The fat man was roaring. "Your new lab assistant is a *spy!*" He thrust an accusing finger into the camera. "Haven't you ever heard of a background check?" He asked, sounding incredulous. Then, in one swift movement, the fat man whipped out a gun and fired into the camera. It rocked for a moment and then fell sideways, partially cracking the screen in the process. Leaves and stems began to quickly obscure the image as the man plodded off-screen.
"What!?" I exclaimed.
"No time to explain." Salvador replied grimly. "Now I'll have to take matters into my own hands."
He whirled around and found himself toe-to-toe with Olivia, who stared up at him admiringly.

"Take me with you." She purred throatily. "I've *longed* to be of service to your cause for YEARS."

"Can you vouch for this woman, Manuel?" Sal asked, staring down at the small package in black before him.

I considered my answer carefully.

"Well, I've known her for a while." I said. "Not very well, but I used her club as a contact point for my unit in Rubacava. I think she knew about it all along."

Olivia nodded slightly.

"I always thought she had potential." I went on. "But there was her connection with Maximino…"

"Who is a known associate of Hector LeMans." Salvador finished coldly.

He moved away from Olivia, who grabbed his uniform lapels with both of her elfin fists. Sal could have easily pulled away, but he didn't.

"I gave Max the swoop when I found *that* out." Olivia said earnestly. "I could've betrayed Manny at any time, but I didn't."

Salvador looked down at her intently for a moment, and then nodded, appearing satisfied.

"We have lost many agents recently." He said. "Any help would be appreciated. Very well, then."

He took Olivia's hands and gently disengaged them from his jacket, before walking swiftly towards the door and calling back to Eva. "I must try to salvage this operation. Contact whatever agents you can and have them rendezvous in gallery four. The rest of you will follow me."

Salvador left, with Olivia and the other agents following, including the nearly-sprouted one who hopped out on his remaining limb.

Eva, Meché and I stayed behind.

"So…" I said to Eva when they had all gone, feeling a warm wave of nostalgia falling over me. "Any messages for me?"

"No." She answered simply. "Calls stopped coming for you the day you left." She then cast a sideways glance at Meché. "They're *still* sending you that lingerie catalogue, though."

I shook my head and Meché laughed.

"So how're you doing, honey?" Eva asked her.

Meché shrugged slightly. "I'm okay, I guess… if a little overwhelmed. What is this 'operation' Salvador was talking about?"

"Sorry, sweetie." Eva said guardedly. "But I can't talk about that. It's not that we don't trust you, but you're someone Hector would *love* to get his hands on. The less you know, the better for all of us. Same goes for you, Cal."

I nodded, understanding.

"I wish Salvador hadn't run off so fast." I said, changing the subject. "I've got some information that I haven't been able to pass on to you guys yet."

"Oh, don't worry… we'll debrief you guys *plenty* later on." Eva considered for a moment. "I suppose one thing I *can* tell you is that we've given up on trying to bring Hector to justice – he's grown far too powerful. We heard how you freed all the souls he cheated, so we only need to eliminate him."

"It's not that simple." I said.

"We've *still* got to help all the people from the island." Meché added.
"What?" Eva asked, surprised. "What do you mean?"
She looked hastily between Meché and me.
"We got them all to the end of the line." I explained. "But the Gatekeeper won't let them cross over, not without their tickets."
"Oh, that's great, Cal." Eva said sarcastically. "Hector's already sold their tickets. We can't hope to *ever* get them back." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but all we can do is make sure that Hector can't cheat anyone else out of their destiny."
"We don't think Hector *did* sell the tickets." I countered.
"Sweetie…" Eva said patiently. "Everyone knows that Hector LeMans will sell a Double-N ticket to whoever can pay."
"Did you ever see any of those tickets?" Meché asked.
"Well, no." Eva admitted. "But what does that matter?"
"If you had seen one, you'd know." I said. "We found cases of them on that factory island, all counterfeit."
For the first time in memory, Eva didn't have a ready comeback.
"Well…" She said thoughtfully after a few seconds. "We wondered how Hector could keep up with the demand. We suspected counterfeiting might be involved, but we couldn't be sure."
"Couldn't you have tried buying a ticket yourselves?" Meché asked.
"Well of course we did, sweetie." Eva answered shortly. "More than once, too. The main idea was to get close to Hector and sprout him, but the agents tasked for that mission never succeeded, or even came back."
"Maybe they took the tickets, and—" I began.
"One of them was your friend, Alexi." Eva snapped.
"Oh."
And I'd recruited the man. Another sprouted soul on my conscience.
"And the rest were just as committed. Somehow, Hector must have found them out." Eva growled softly, shaking her head. "I admit, what you say complicates things a little, but… I'm sorry, Cal. We have to go ahead with this as planned, if we can. Now, you'll have to give me space so I can round up the agents Salvador needs."

I gave Eva her space as she worked on an old radio. She seemed to need it, apparently having a lot of trouble raising the aforementioned agents. While Eva was barking call signs into a microphone, Meché gestured for me to come over to where she was standing.
"Look at this." She said, showing a piece of paper to me. It was a memo from Salvador.
'In light of recent disappearances,' it read, 'all agents are ordered to avoid travelling alone until further notice.'
"If they're all being that cautious, why would Salvador take on Olivia so quickly?" Meché asked.
"I get the feeling you don't like her much." I said.
"I'm not so sure she's reliable."

"Well, she took care of that mercury switch." I pointed out. "But you're right: Sal's pretty careful. He usually screens potential recruits." I cast a glance over at Eva, still working on the radio. "Eva's not having much luck, either. I guess they've lost a lot of valuable agents recently."

"*Hector!* " Meché hissed the name like a curse, savagely crumpling the memo into a tight ball. "What's wrong with people? How can they put up with what he's doing? How can he get away with robbing good people and sprouting all others left-and-right?"

"You saw the city." I huffed. "Hector's throwing a good time."

"So what you're saying is that people are being distracted by a shiny object." Meché said sadly with a shake of her head. "Well, I don't buy it, Manny. What makes Eva different from that man we met who turned his car around? Supposedly *she's* the worst of the two. Or what separates you from Domino? You were both bad enough to be made reapers, apparently."

"I don't know." I admitted.

Even after all my time as a reaper, I still didn't understand the full logistics of a soul's destiny.

"Me neither." She said with a sigh. "Maybe you're right. Maybe glamour and glitz are all it takes to make people look the other way."

"Maybe." I replied.

It wasn't worth arguing about, especially since I was afraid I couldn't be proven wrong.

Chapter 45 – The Conflicted Florist

After a short while, I found myself looking over the LSA's surveillance equipment. Apparently they had tracking bugs all over the city, and there was that fallen agent with some kind of camera as well.

The picture was still on the monitor. The image was the right-way-up now, and apparently sitting on a table or workbench of some kind. It was hard to tell, since there were leaves obscuring most of the image; but right in front of the camera was the same little man who had cowered before Hector. He was fiddling with the foliage that grew from the now-dismembered soul.

He seemed to be… pruning?

I'd seen too many sproutings to be very sickened by them anymore, but *this* guy was way beyond sick.

"So who's the plant nut?" I asked myself, but out loud.

"That 'nut'," Eva said, putting down the radio microphone and coming over to me, "is Hector LeMans' personal munitions expert, Bowlsley – AKA, the Florist. That was his job in the old world, but here he's a botanical weapons expert. This has left him fairly… conflicted."

Meché had come over and looked at the screen, too.

"I'd call that 'disturbed'." She said, shuddering.

"He looks like a hippie." I pointed out. "I wouldn't expect a guy like that to be involved in weapons at all. But since he is, why is he making Sproutella for Hector instead of our side?"

"We would love to recruit him." Eva said. "He developed a special kind of Sproutella just for Hector – it's almost instantaneous. But his lab is in Hector's tower. He's totally untouchable."

"Maybe I could get him out." I said confidently.

"Darling…" Eva said calmly. "How do you expect to do that? No offence – you've accomplished some amazing things – but you have no real field experience. Anyway," She added with a sniff, "it's been tried."

"Maybe I'm no James Bond," I replied, "but I *do* have this." I pulled the note the Gatekeeper gave me out of my pocket. "Bowlsley looks to me like a nervous guy. If we can get this to him, he might panic. Maybe he'll even run for it and take his special formula with him."

Eva took the note and looked it over. "This is Hector's handwriting!" She exclaimed. "Where'd you ever get this?"

"It was waiting for me at the end of the line." I said as Eva shook her head in amazement. "No doubt about it, Hector's on the ball."

"You're telling me." Eva grumbled. "There's no salutation on this thing, so maybe Bowlsley will think it was meant for him. We hear that he's been getting progressively more unstable. I think you're right – he might just take off if he sees this. Question is, how do we get it to him?"

"Carrier pigeon?" Meché suggested.

Eva shook her head. "These birds are trained to deliver messages only to our agents."

"Well," I pointed, "you've got an agent lying in front of Bowlsley, you know."

Eva looked at me, suddenly impressed. "Now *that's* thinking, sweetheart! The paper this note's written on is kind of large, but it's worth a try."

She picked a bird and managed to get Hector's threat into the tube. Then she took the pigeon and carried it outside. A few minutes later, she came back.

"Well," she said, "Lola's airborne." I winced and Meché jumped slightly. We sure didn't see that one coming. "We'll just have to wait and see."

"What about Salvador?" I asked after a while. "Did you get enough agents for him?"

"It seemed like you couldn't get in touch with a lot." Meché said. "Is Hector's gang hurting you that much?"

"Don't worry about it, honey." Eva spoke without looking at us. "We can take care of ourselves. We've lost plenty of our agents, sure, but so has Hector. We're still plenty strong. I got a hold of enough, and they'll contact others. The ones I couldn't raise…" She shrugged. "They're probably in public places and have their radios off. When they feel it's safe to turn them back on, they'll check in."

We waited for what seemed like an eternity, staring at the monitor with the sprouted agent. There was a tiny window visible behind Bowlsley, but it was difficult to make out anything else. He had finished his pruning and was arranging some of the agent's longer bones into a flowerbox.

"This guy is just plain sick!" I exclaimed. Eva just muttered something to herself.

Eventually, there was some movement in the window behind Bowlsley. We saw Lola the pigeon settle down on the sill outside, a ghoulish speck of white against a sea of darkness. The pigeon looked straight at the camera and began to hop cautiously forward – though she didn't seem to do anything significant after that.

After a few seconds, Meché broke the silence.

"Isn't it going to *do* anything?"

"They're trained to wait." Eva replied.

"If Bowlsley doesn't turn around…" I began to ask.

"Then the pigeon will come back." Eva answered.

"I guess this isn't going to work." Meché sighed.

"Give it time."

There was a sudden flurry of movement on the windowsill. The tiny pigeon seemed to disappear without warning, as if by magic.

And then we saw it – the ghastly black figure of one of the demon ravens I had seen in Rubacava.

It had swallowed the carrier pigeon whole. One more Lola down.

Bowlsley turned around when he heard the sudden commotion.

"Oh, sure." Eva groused. "*Now* he turns around."

"Well, it was worth a shot." I said with a sigh.

There came a noise from the monitor.

"One of Hector's messengers…?" We heard Bowlsley say. There was an obvious quaver in the florist's voice, or maybe it was just the lousy sound equipment.

I was about to say something about rotten timing, when the raven convulsed slightly and hacked up. Something seemed to fly out of its mouth. It was hard to tell what was going on, but we could see Bowlsley stepping forward to pick something up.

"A m-message for m-*me*?" He stammered, straightening up.

Eva's head snapped back around towards the monitor.

"No way!" Eva breathed, sounding very impressed. Meché flinched.

Bowlsley suddenly became very agitated as he read the note.

"I knew it!" He exclaimed, crumpling up the note and throwing it away. "I *knew* he was out to get me the whole time!" Bowlsley sprinted off-camera, but we could still hear his voice. "He's going to have to find himself another florist!"

There were some rattling and awkward crashing noises, followed by a cold silence.

"Lucky break." I said.

"Hey, don't knock it." Eva scowled. "Unless Hector has a large stash of Bowlsley's special Sproutella somewhere – and if Bowlsley didn't leave the formula behind – maybe we just did some good work. If we can't take care of Hector tonight, this might even things up a little for the next attempt."

"Eva…" I said after a moment. "I know you don't want to talk details, but if Salvador wants as many agents as possible to rendezvous with him, he must be planning something like a raid, or even a battle. Right?"

"I'm not going to argue with you, sweetheart." She nodded. I chose to take that as an affirmative.

"Hector must have a lot of protection." I went on.

"He wouldn't still be here if he didn't."

"Does he ever see anybody? I mean, when someone wants to buy a Double-N ticket, do they deal with Hector or a member of his gang?"

"As far as we've been able to find out," Eva answered, "anyone who wants to buy a Double-N ticket buys it from Hector himself." She folded her arms and gave me the old 'paperclips-are-not-toys' glare. "Where are you going with this, Cal?"

"Well, it just seems to me that an attack from a bunch of LSA toughs is exactly the kind of thing Hector would be ready for, but anyone in the market for a ticket can get to him without all that shooting, right?"

"I told you, we've sent agents to try and buy tickets before, darling. You already know what happened."

"Yeah, but those were official *agents*. I'm not exactly your average LSA man, am I? And besides, I'm still on top of that mountain at the end-of-the-line as far as Hector knows, unless he figured his note would make me bolt into the next world the second I read it. Either way, I don't think the man's staying up at night worrying about me."

Eva shrugged. "Maybe you've got a point, Cal. But I still don't see what you're aiming at."

"I've *gotta* find out what happened to those tickets and try to get them all back. If I can get to Hector, maybe I can do something about it."

"Maybe you can… but you'd be taking an awfully big risk, sweetheart. Even supposing you manage to get in to see him, you might not get back out."

It was my turn to shrug. "Yeah, but I'm probably not getting out of this world anyway. If I can do a little good while I meet my destiny, then I can take it."

Eva projected an unhappy shadow-of-a-frown but said nothing.

"So here's the plan." I went on, looking down at myself – not a pretty sight at the best of times. "First, I'm gonna need new clothes, something that doesn't reek of sled dog. A really sharp suit would be good. I need to look like I'm loaded if Hector's going to take me seriously." I saw Eva nod. "Trouble is, I'm tapped out. Glottis and I emptied our accounts in Zapato to help finance the trip to the end of the line. Olivia footed the bills since we left Rubacava, but she didn't give me her bank card. Can the LSA help out?"

"Are you kidding me?" Eva asked incredulously. My spirits began to sink, but then she went on in a brighter tone. "If the price of a new suit will help bring down Hector, you've got it. But what about Mercedes?"

"Well…" I began.

"You'd *better* include me." Meché said after having been silent this whole time. "You'd be more convincing as a couple, you know."

"That's good." Eva replied. "*Really* good. A lot of Hector's customers are old married couples." She shook her head. "Why the *hell* didn't we think of that before?"

"Search me." I shrugged. "So, once we get dressed up, I'll try to get in to see Hector – and I'll need a gun so we'll have something to talk about when I get there."

"I can fix you up, no problem." Eva said. "Have you ever fired a sprouting gun?"

"No, but I've handled regular guns before."

One of the perks of having been drafted in peacetime was playing with things that go bang without the wartime drag of someone else firing back.

"Well, these things have a different kind of kick, and the aim is a little tricky. You should practice. But first you need to get your new clothes before the shops close."

"Yeah, good idea." I said.

"I'll get you guys some money." Eva finished, and left the room.

"I haven't been shopping in *ages!* " Meché exclaimed.

"Just remember, we're in a hurry here." I reminded her. "We go in, get new outfits, and come right back out again."

Meché shook her head and muttered, "Men!"

Chapter 46 – Nuevo Marrow

We went topside and bought our new clothes. We weren't as quick about it as I'd have liked to be, but… well, I'm a man and Meché's a woman and I'll leave it at that.

When we got back to the LSA headquarters, Eva was waiting for me with a gun and good news.

"Take a look at this." She said, holding out a green-tinted canister. "But be careful!"

"What is it?" I asked as I took it.

"Glottis had it sent to me." Eva answered contently. "It seems a little man in overalls ran past him a while ago and dropped this."

"Bowlsley!" I exclaimed.

"Looks that way. We did a test – this is the fast-acting Sproutella." She laughed when I quickly handed the canister back; I decided I'd be much happier not knowing how they tested it. "We might be able to duplicate it, if we can. It might shift the balance of power *our* way. Anyone hit with this stuff doesn't have time to shoot back." Eva noticed me shiver, and went on in a reassuring tone. "I know Cal, but they shoot us too… so we have to shoot back."

"Last one standing wins." I sighed. "I understand. It's just a little chilling to hear *you* talk like that."

"It's been a long time since I was a meek little secretary, darling."

"I never thought of you as 'meek'."

"If you say so, Cal. Come on, let's get you to the firing range."

"While you're doing that," Meché said, "maybe I should try to find out where Hector is."

"Actually, his casino tower is directly above these headquarters." Eva pointed out. "So that's the best place to start."

"Alright." Meché nodded confidently. "Meet me there, Manny."

"Volunteers quickly for dangerous work." Eva said approvingly after Meché had gone. "She could be very useful to the cause."

"As far as I'm concerned, she *is* the cause."

Eva gave me an appraising look.

"Come on, Cal." She said after a moment of silence. "Let's see what you can do with that gun."

It turned out Eva had been more than right – the Sproutella gun *did* recoil differently from a regular gun. Although similar to a gas-powered BB gun, it had a lot more kick, and aiming was far harder than I had expected.

"These darts don't have the range of a lead bullet, sweetheart." Eva laughed when I couldn't hit the target anywhere near the bullseye using the water-filled 'blanks' provided on the firing range. "They're bigger and heavier so they drop pretty quickly. You have to aim *high*. The further away you are, the higher you have to aim."

"I'm planning to be very close to Hector when I shoot him, you know."

"You still have to know how to handle that thing, and you're not going anywhere until I'm convinced you do."

That took quite a while, but eventually I was able to hit what I was aiming at. The breakthrough came when I figured out I needed to feel like I was overcompensating for distance.

When Eva was finally satisfied, I strapped a shoulder-holster under my coat and got ready to go.

"Good luck, Manny." Eva said.

"Thanks." I replied.

I unbuttoned my coat and checked that my tie was straight. Then, feeling a little disappointed at having to say goodbye to Eva again so suddenly, I went to the door.

However, I hesitated for a moment, and turned back.

"Look…" I began, feeling childishly emotional. "I might not come back for this, so… I think I should apologize now."

She tilted her skull. "What for, Cal?"

"Well, I'm not sure exactly. It's just that…" I struggled, then took a deep breath and let it out. "I know I was kind of an asshole all those years ago, so I think I should try to make things right before—"

"Manny…" She said earnestly. "I'm not sure what the problem here is."

"I've been getting wise to myself the last couple of years." I went on, wishing I could adequately express what I was feeling. "And I don't like what I see. People have gotten hurt because I just wasn't paying attention to anything besides me. I've been worried that maybe you were one of those people… somehow. I don't know… I hope not. But I can't walk out this door without—"

"Don't worry about it, darling." She said, a tone of relief in her voice. "If you *had* done anything, you'd have known. Believe me. You were always aces with me. If things had been different…" She trailed off wistfully.

I didn't want to think about what might have been, especially in case I decided it was what I wanted.

"Well, that's good to know." I said shortly. "I couldn't take it if I'd done anything to hurt you. Not on top of everything else… you know."

"Sure, Cal. I know." Eva nodded, apparently understanding. "Well, you'd better take off. Mercedes is probably getting worried."

"Right." I said, turning to go out the door. "Hold my calls!"

"Asshole!" She called after me with a laugh.

I emerged out of the sewers in a dingy alleyway near the intersection of 42nd and Corley. It wasn't hard to spot Hector's Casino – it was labelled plain enough in bright neon equalling Times Square multiplied by Las Vegas cubed. I felt a little exposed out on the street, but I dismissed that quickly. I was in the big city, and I hadn't been there in years. No one should recognize me. No one even *looked* at me as I emerged from the alley and walked over to the casino.

I went in and was more-or-less ignored by the sullen-looking hat-check girl, too. That suited me, but I recognized then what a good asset I'd had in Lupé and I hoped internally that the overeager kid was somewhere safe and jacked on sugar. If I could go back to my old club as it had been, I might even have begged her to give me every last detail of her latest coat-check scheme just to have gotten another taste of those good old days. But of course, that wasn't possible.

Emphasizing that fact, Hector's casino was even more garish inside than outside. I guess he didn't have anyone like Lola to help coordinate the colours.

I shoved aside the reflexive guilt I felt and focused on trying to find Meché in the sea of neon lighting. I followed the loudest noises around and eventually found myself in a huge room filled with rows of slot machines. Figures. Might as well have been a big flashing sign out front saying: *We Got <u>No</u> Class*. I scanned the room, trying to spot the green-checked outfit Meché had on without appearing too conspicuous. I had expected it to stand out against all the red and gold in the room, and it actually did.

I saw her toting a bucket of coins.

"Meché…" I said as quietly as I could as I came up beside her.

"Manny?" She whispered back when she saw it was me. "What kept you?"

"I needed more practice than I thought. What've you found out?"

Meché stopped walking and looked quickly around. "Hector's here." She answered urgently. "He has an office in the penthouse suite. There's an express elevator in the rear of the casino, but it's guarded by a big red security demon. You can get through only with a password."

I was very impressed. "Hey, you've really been putting your time to good use."

"My new boyfriend likes to talk." She said begrudgingly.

"Your new… what?" I stammered.

"Jealous?" She asked, 'grinning' wickedly.

"Uh…"

Thankfully, she let me off the hook.

"It's that little guy way over there." She pointed. "He knows the password, somehow. He's even got it written down. So he says, anyway."

"Okay, so what *is* the password?" I asked when she didn't spill it.

Meché shook her head. "I don't know. He won't tell me and I don't dare press him any more than I already have – but I've got an idea. While I was getting more change for 'Mr. High Roller', I heard some people talking about a toga party at the Hotel Romano next door. Maybe I can get him there. You can follow us and look through his suit after he changes."

"You're trickier than I thought." I said.

"Well, I've been watching *you* operate."

I winced. "Ouch."

Meché began moving again. "I'd better get back before he runs out of coins… again." She shook her head.

I followed closely, but when we got closer to her 'boyfriend' I let out an exclamation and whirled the other way.

"What is it?" Meché asked.

"That's 'Chowchilla' Charlie!" I answered over my shoulder. "If he recognizes me, then we're sunk."

"*Chowchilla* Charlie?" Meché asked, startled. "So *he's* the guy... do you think he's in with Hector?"

"He must be, if he really knows that password." I said. "I *knew* that suitcase full of counterfeit tickets wasn't his."

But I was admittedly still very confused by the kabuki he and Max had played with it.

"You'll just have to try and keep out of sight while I get him to the Romano."

"I know this guy, Meché." I warned. "He can play the slots for days."

"Well, I still have to try." She countered scornfully.

She walked over to Charlie and placed the bucket of change beside the one he already had. Without a word, Charlie dug into the new bucket, feeding coins into the machine with one hand and pawing at Meché with the other.

I turned away.

After a few more minutes, it was clear that Meché wasn't going to get Charlie out of the casino any time soon. She pouted and pleaded and used just about every female tool of persuasion there is to get him away from the machine, but none of it worked. Charlie just wasn't going to budge until he hit the jackpot – which seemed increasingly unlikely as time passed.

So much for Charlie's 'infallible system'.

In fact, *nobody* around me seemed to be having any luck with the machines. Except for one guy, that is. Whenever someone gave up and walked away, he'd go up to it and clean it out. Consistently. And he was pretty remarkable for another reason: he rode a unicycle and wore a trench coat, complete with a large hat.

The unicycle actually wasn't all that strange – he might have lost his legs in some kind of accident, maybe even a run-in with a wild demon – but when he went up to a machine, he seemed to snuggle up against it, and then go entirely rigid. I could swear I almost saw something animal-like scurry up into the slot that released the money shortly before the machine paid off.
But the light around the slot machines was very dim compared to the rest of the casino, just like it had been in mine with the roulette tables.
Easier to rip people off that way.
When he turned around to make his way over to another machine, I got a quick glimpse of his face. Suddenly, it started to become clear.
I walked over and quietly spoke to the mysterious soul.

"What's going on under that raincoat?"

He didn't jump, or even flinch.

"I don't know." He replied with a familiar voice. "What's going on under that pinstripe?"

"Didn't Salvador chop you in half earlier this evening?" I asked, breaking the ice on who we both were.
The agent didn't look at me. He just pretended to play the machines with his one remaining arm.

"Yes." He replied under his breath. "Which has given me this glorious opportunity to continue serving the cause by gathering funds for the LSA while stealing from our archenemy at the same time."
I figured out what the 'animal' must have been. The agent had been wriggling out of his coat and up the slot in order to tip the coin box.

"I guess it's my fault that when Salvador thinks of fund-raising, he immediately imagines a casino." I said morosely. "Can you crack any machine?"

"None of these unholy temples is safe from the LSA." He exclaimed softly.

"How about that one over there?" I asked, indicating the one Charlie was feeding.

"The one with the sucker planted in front? Tell me when he gives up and I'll make it cough cold change."

"I can't wait that long." I said impatiently. "Are you willing to take instructions from me?"

"Depends."

"If I can distract that guy, I want you to do your thing… but leave the change. My mission requires me to get him to the Hotel Romano, and he won't leave unless he wins."

"Can do." The agent said.

"Okay, give me a second."

I tried to discreetly get Meché's attention. It took a little while, but fortunately she spotted me waving before I had to resort to fake sneezes.
When she was looking at me, I curled one hand up to mime Charlie's bucket of coins, placing it on top of the slot machine nearest to me. Then I shoved it off with my other hand. I pointed at the bucket and made a pushing motion, just to be sure she got the point.
She nodded.

When Charlie pulled the lever on his machine and was fully-focused on watching the dials spin around, Meché shoved the bucket off the machine. Charlie jumped when the bucket crashed to the floor and swore loudly when he saw his coins scattering everywhere.

"I'm sorry!" I heard Meché say. "I guess I got a little excited."

Charlie grumbled something to himself as he and Meché got down on their hands and knees to gather the coinage.

The LSA agent quietly rolled over and worked his magic. Charlie's machine started spilling out coins like there was no tomorrow, and the agent quickly moved over to the nearest free machine.

Charlie looked up from the floor to see the coin slot overflowing with silver.

"I did it!" He crowed. "My system worked! I knew it, I told you!"

He started stuffing his pockets greedily.

"That's *great*." Meché said, sounding more relieved than glad. "Now let's go so you can buy me a drink at the Romano."

Charlie finished picking up his 'winnings' and took Meché by the arm.

"Come, my lovely," he said with mock suavity, "I have another infallible system I'd like to demonstrate."

He growled in a way that made me gag as they started walking to the exit.

Chapter 47 – Smooth Hector

I followed at a discreet distance.

Once inside the Romano, they went into the convention room where the toga party was being held. They gathered some sheets from the organizers and went into separate restrooms to change. Meché was quick and came out first. From the 'Bride of Frankenstein' way she had the sheet wrapped, I guessed she still had her clothes on underneath.

"Stick with Charlie for at least fifteen minutes." I whispered to her. "Then try to ditch him without his noticing. I'll meet you at the train station with the tickets."

"Right." She said. "Do you have any idea how long you'll be?"

I shook my head, wishing I had an answer. "For all I know, there's a waiting room full of suckers to see Hector. I'll try to make it quick, but you'll have to be patient and try not to worry if I don't show up right away."

"Okay, Manny." She nodded. "But when you do…?"

"Well, there won't be a ticket for me, so you'll have to go back by yourself."

Meché nodded, a little sadly it seemed, but she went on in a self-assured tone.

"I'll tell that Gatekeeper *everything*. He has to help us! But what will you do?"

I shrugged. "Stick around here, I guess. I'll give the LSA a hand. Even if I do take care of Hector, there's still his gang."

The men's room door opened abruptly, to which Meché and I quickly separated. Together, she and Charlie went over to the party.
I slipped into the men's room and found Charlie's suit in a crumpled heap. After some feverish rummaging, I fished out the slip of paper he had written the password on.

I moved quickly back to Hector's casino and made my way over to the rear of the building, where I soon found the express elevator.
"Oh, great…" I stopped and muttered when I saw the demon in charge of the elevator.
It was Brennis, the tube-switcher maintenance demon from my reaper days.
It was getting to be like an old-home reunion week.
Well, maybe he wouldn't recognize me.

I marched over to him and tried to sound official.
"I have business with Hector. I've just spoken to him on the phone and he's expecting me."
"You know Hector LeMans, eh?" Brennis asked gruffly. Apparently, he hadn't recognized me. Either that or he didn't care. "Hokie-dokie! Then answer me this one simple question: who wrote *Little Women*?"
"Lonely little men." I answered, feeling stupid.
"Best two out of three?"
"Don't mess with me. I know Hector LeMans."
Satisfied, Brennis opened up the elevator doors and let me inside. I shook my head as I rose up. What kind of smart guy thought up *that* stupid password?

The elevator came to a stop in a very elegant lobby… which was immediately spoiled by the large 'HL' monogram on the floor.
Straight across from the elevator was an enormous pair of engraved bronze doors – the portal to Hector's lair and the Double-N tickets.
I strode over and rapped my knuckle on the door, reaching into my coat and getting ready to draw.
This was it – my imminent meeting with the man responsible for this entire mess.
One door swung inward, revealing the obese obscenity that was Hector.
He was cackling gleefully as he emerged.
"I knew you could change her m—" He began. "*What!?*" He exclaimed when he saw me. "Who are *you!?*"
"I'm the grim—"
"*Bah!!*" He roared, slamming the door in my face.
Well, that didn't go the way I'd hoped.
"Oh, I wouldn't try talking to him right now." A small voice piped up from the corner of the lobby.
I really, *really* should have checked for potential witnesses first.
I turned around to face the mousy couple that I hadn't noticed before now.
"He's mad at us because we won't buy his tickets." The man said.

At that moment, I noticed that the man looked familiar.
Then, it hit me.
"Celso Flores!?" I asked, amazed at the coincidence. The woman beside him must have been his wife.
He caught up with her after all.
"What are *you* doing in Hector LeMans' waiting room?" I stammered.
"Oh," Celso said, evidently not remembering me, "he sent us out here to make up our minds about his offer. And who are you, if you don't mind me asking?"
I couldn't believe he hadn't yet recognized me.
"I'm your travel agent." I said.
"Oh, I have a travel agent already." Celso said with a triumphant tone. "But he's miles away mopping floors in an automat, so I suppose the position is free."
"I work for Hector." I lied, capitalizing on Celso's ignorance. "He sent me here to answer your questions."
"I'll handle this, my sweet one." Celso said when his wife opened her jaw to speak. "What can you tell me about these Double-N tickets? The price seems much more than 'double'."
I wanted to tell them to run away as fast as they could, but I doubted that would have done any good. I could sense that Celso wanted to be persuaded to buy the tickets.
"The real question is," I said, resuming my salesman-like demeanour, "don't you feel that you're worth it?"
"I know *we're* worth it." Celso countered. "But are the *tickets* worth it?"
That was a good comeback.
"What exactly are you saving your money for, anyway? A rainy day?" I asked. "'Cause let me tell you… you're *dead*. Every day is rainy from now on."
That usually worked with the penny-pinchers who balked at getting the best package they qualified for. Not with Celso, though.
"Yes." He went on. "But that's no reason not to be careful with your money."
"Then tell me." I asked. "What *are* you here to see Hector for, anyway?" I answered for Celso before he could speak. "It's because you've heard he can make your journey across the Land of the Dead easier, am I right? Now, I've been to the edge of the world and back, and I can tell you that there are plenty of things and creatures worth avoiding."
"Actually," Celso said, "I've just got back from quite an adventure myself, so—"
"Well, I'm sure you've seen flying spiders and flaming beavers, but trust me, it gets a lot worse."
I launched into an epic spiel describing the horrors I'd seen since leaving the DOD, focusing primarily on the demons we encountered on the journey from Puerto Zapato, but building them up to gargantuan proportions.
When I was finally done, Celso and his wife were awed.
"I had no idea travelling the Land of the Dead could be so fraught with peril!" He exclaimed.

"Now, how much would you pay just to skip the whole thing?" I asked, driving the sale home.

"Darling, come." Celso said definitively, taking his wife's arm and guiding her over to Hector's door. "Let us blow our nest egg together."

Celso knocked politely and Hector immediately opened up, though a little more warily this time.

"Mr. LeMans," Celso said, "we've decided to take you up on your generous offer."

"Excellent! *Excellent!* " Hector gushed, stepping back to give the Flores' space to enter his office. "The little lady changed your mind, eh?"

"Actually, no." Celso went on as Hector began to close the door behind them. "It was your sales agent over there."

Hector paused in a confused way, then leaned his head out the door and looked over at me, before finally turning back to Celso.

"Well, of… of course!" He spluttered. "He's one of my best! Well, let's chat then, shall we?"

The door closed with a thud.

"Still got it." I sighed. I felt pretty bad, though – setting Celso and his wife up for a fall; but that was just added incentive for taking Hector down.

Before I could settle down to wait, the door whipped open again and Hector poked his head out.

"I don't know who you are, and I don't know what spell you've cast on the Flores couple…" He sounded like he might have been angered, and I braced myself to start shooting right then. "But stick around. There's something across town I'd like to show you."

He closed the door again.

Well, that was fine. If he was going to take me someplace private, everything should work out nicely.

A few minutes later the two bronze doors opened again. Celso and his wife came out, followed by a jolly Hector who was congratulating them on their 'wise purchase'. He propelled them into the elevator without seeming to hurry them too much, before finally turning toward me.

"So," he said, hands behind his back and rocking on his heels, sending a cheesy 'smile' my way, "you're the one who finally cracked the Flores couple, eh? Well done, my boy! Well done! I really thought I wasn't going to close that sale. Do you have any experience, or is it just a knack?"

"Wish you could have seen it." I replied indifferently. "It was old school all the way."

"Ah, a practiced hand!" Hector exclaimed.

"About thirty years." I lied, having only been a reaper for a fraction of that time. Hector on the other hand looked even happier. "Plus management and experience in, uh, 'promotion'."

I figured the bastard had been around the park often enough to get the racketeering euphemism and draw the intended conclusions.

Hector had, and he did. He clacked his hands together happily, showing me that he was hooked.

"Excellent!"

"Why do you ask?" I said, letting the line run out a little.

"I just happen to have a job open in my organization." He answered. "Did I say 'a job'?" Hector exclaimed theatrically. "Pish! What I've got is an *opportunity!* Give me an hour of your time and you won't regret it."

"I'm sure I won't." I nodded, pulling the line taught.

Hector took me down to his personal limousine, and within a few short minutes we were cruising across town to the Bureau of Acquisitions building where I used to work. Not exactly what I was expecting, but then I wasn't quite sure just what to expect.

Once we had arrived, I was surprised – and a little disturbed – when we got into the elevator and Hector punched the button for my old floor.

"We've had quite a lot of openings in this office through the last couple of years," he was saying as he led me past Eva's old desk, "and frankly we've had trouble filling them. I could really use a closer like you on the team."

We came to my dusty old office, and Hector ushered me in.

The scene was just too weird.

"This could be *your* office." He said proudly.

It didn't look much different from the last time I saw it. Even the books Copal had given me were still sitting there.

"I gotta admit," I said encouragingly, "you make a tempting offer… but let's skip the sales pitch and get down to cases."

Hector chuckled, his huge belly wobbling. "Very good. Let's."

"Now, you want my sales experience, and my ability to close the hard deals. I've never been a big fan of the public sector, though – not enough money in it. You know it, and I know it. So what is this 'opportunity' you keep talking about?"

"Well, this isn't the *usual* sort of public sector job I'm offering." Hector replied slyly. "I assure you, I can offer you a contract that is more than competitive with anything the private sector has to offer. Plus, as an added incentive…" Hector stopped by the desk, and pulled a briefcase out from behind the filing cabinets. "Two percent of these."

I knew what was inside even before he opened it. Double-N tickets.

"Mr., uh… Mr.?" Hector fumbled.

I could see the tickets twitching around. They were the genuine article, and Hector was ready to be netted.

I slowly pulled my gun and pointed it straight at his face.

"The name's Calavera." I warned. "And I want a bigger cut."

Hector looked thrown, but only for a fraction of a second. He knew how to keep his cool.

He laughed pompously with only a trace of nervousness. "Oh, but Mr. Calavera," he said, "I'm going to need most of these to get *myself* out of this world. You see, I've been a *very* bad boy!" He laughed again and closed the briefcase.

Hector glanced toward the windows, which I took to be another sign of nervousness.
I held out my free hand, keeping the daisy-maker steady. "I'm going to deliver those to their rightful owners, and I'm going to deliver *you* to the compost pile."
"Are you now?" He asked archly.
There was a sudden crash as a demon raven flew through the window, showering the room with broken glass.
I fired wildly and saw the raven fall to the carpet with a thud, before rapidly breaking out into a floral bouquet.

Hector was already out the door and running down the hall.
He had the suitcase.
I followed as quickly as I could.
He got to the end of the hall and turned toward the elevator. I took aim and fired off another shot. I missed, the dart pinged off the elevator door, and Hector spun around and dashed into Don Copal's old office.
He was pretty quick for such a lard bucket.
I gave chase.
The office was entirely empty, but a window was hanging open. I cautiously went out onto the fire escape landing. There was no sign of Hector, but I heard a loud clattering from below. I leaned out over the railing and saw Hector awkwardly climbing down the building with the case in one hand.
I fired, but missed again.
Hector tried to descend faster. I started climbing down myself, before leaning out and shooting again… and I missed.
I guess I just got lucky with the raven.

We kept going like that. Hector stumbled his way down while I followed, taking occasional pot-shots. I had to put a new clip into the gun about a third of the way down, and then another two-thirds down. I was a really lousy shot, but Hector was getting more and more panicked with each blast.
He had to be figuring that, with all the rounds flying past him, the odds were that one had to eventually find its mark. He tried to pick up the pace with each round I fired, but the faster he moved the more he stumbled.
Helping me out was the fact that he only had two hands, with one reserved for the briefcase and the other needed to help him stay on his feet. So long as I kept the heat on, whatever gun he may have remained salted away.

When Hector finally got to the bottom of the building – only the ladder of the fire escape remaining – I got a little panicky myself.
This looked like my last chance.
So as Hector began lowering the ladder, I started to hastily empty my gun, hoping to bring him down by filling the air with multiple rounds at once.
I didn't hit Hector, but I did hit both the suitcase and the ladder.
He panicked, lost grip on both, and fell into the alleyway beneath us.
The suitcase stayed on the fire escape, and Hector took off.

Well, I got part of what I was after.
I picked up the briefcase and dropped down into the alley myself. I soon found a payphone and made two calls: one to get a message to Eva, and the second for a cab.

Chapter 48 – Taken for a Ride

Meché and Glottis were waiting for me at the Number Nine train station.
I paid the cabbie his fare.
"You got him?" Glottis asked when the cab had driven off.
"No, he got away. But he dropped this."
I placed the suitcase down at Meché's feet and opened it. The tickets suddenly began to twitch and flutter, as one leapt up from the pile and under Meché's dress, through her sleeve and straight into her hand.
Suffice to say, she was pretty startled.
"That one must be yours." I observed dryly, shutting the suitcase again. I stood up and held it out for Meché to take.
"Manny…" She began.
"No, don't say it. You have a train to catch."
"I don't want to leave you." She went on, saying it anyway. "Not like this."
"You're the only one who can get on that train." I pointed out. Anyone else who tried would cause the Number Nine to jump into the pits of hell, taking the tickets with them.
"The *Bone Wagon*—" She fumbled.
"That'd take months. Those people have waited too long already."
"…Yes." She finally said. "You're right." Meché took the case from me with shaking hands and sighed. "Goodbye, Manny. I'm glad you were my travel agent."
"Me too, angel." I said, giving her a quick hug. "Have a good trip."
She turned away and took the escalator up to the boarding platform.
I looked away.
"You gonna be okay, Manny?" Glottis asked.
"Yeah, sure. I just—"
I broke off when I heard Meché scream.

We whirled around and saw Meché at the top of the escalator, fighting a losing battle against one of Hector's demonic raven creatures. It was trying to snatch the suitcase away from her.
Glottis and I frantically ran towards her. As we leapt up the stairs two-at-a-time, Meché heaved the case in my direction. I caught it in my stride but was knocked backwards, rolling down the escalator and crashing across the sidewalk to the curb. When I finally stopped spinning, I clambered to my feet and shook my head to clear it. I glanced up at the platform where Glottis had the raven in both hands, trying to tear it apart while it clawed at his eyes.
"*Run!*" I shouted to Meché, who was standing helplessly near the combatants. "Find Salvador!"

At that moment, a car came screeching around the corner and squealed to a stop alongside me. I sprang away, reaching for my gun just in case.
The door swung open, and someone called out from inside.
"Get in, quick!" Olivia's voice said urgently.
I leapt into the back, clutching the suitcase with both arms as the car tore away down the streets of El Marrow.

I pounded on the back of the front seat, my head swimming from what had just happened.
"We were supposed to have coverage back there!" I snarled. "Where are all of Salvador's men?"
"I don't know." Olivia sneered. "He hasn't told me yet."
She tossed something white and round into the backseat with me.
To my horror, I instantly recognized what it was.
"*Hola*, Manuel." Salvador's head said grimly, staring up at me with hollow eyes.
"Sal—" I began to say, but fear took the words right out of me.
"No talking!" Olivia ordered violently. "I have a gun. Which reminds me, unload yours and toss it up here – clip first. And just so you don't get any cute ideas…" She floored the accelerator and started weaving recklessly amongst the cars she was passing. "Shoot me and you'll be smashed into splinters."
I had no choice but to do as I was told.
"Who's a good boy?" Olivia cooed, slowing the car down.

A few long minutes later she turned onto a major thoroughfare. I had no idea where we were going, and I didn't care to ask.
I looked gingerly down at what was left of Salvador. He looked like they'd given him a pretty good beating. His head was cracked and heavily abraded. But what about his body?
I looked at Olivia, and immediately figured it out – she had turned Salvador's trick for saving sprouted agents against him.
Filthy, backstabbing whore.
A white spot burned scathingly inside me, but I wasn't sure who I was more enraged at: Olivia for betraying my trust, or me for trusting her.
I just glared at the back of her skull as she drove. There are no words for the unimaginable rage I was experiencing at that moment.
After a little while she seemed to fidget in her seat, although maybe it was just my imagination.
After a long while of driving straight through the main road, she turned off onto the freeway and headed out of town. Eventually, she turned again into a two-lane highway, and then onto a roughly-tarmacked road.
It must have taken about an hour of winding through pitch-black darkness, but finally Olivia brought the car to a stop. She got out, pointing her gun through the window at me.
"Time for you to swing, daddy-o." She purred. "Let's see you walk."
She gestured with the gun for me to get out.

I did the only thing I could, and managed to get a good look around.
We were in a dark meadow – an immense field that stretched off into infinity, without a speck of bare ground to be seen.
Just millions upon billions of fully-bloomed flowers.
"These flowers… *all* people Hector has sprouted!?" I exclaimed.
I don't know how to describe what I was feeling. I guess it was like a mix of seasickness, vertigo and something in the 'have-you-seen-my-mommy' category. If I could have vomited, I probably would have.
"Hey," Olivia rejoined sharply, "when you're on top like my boyfriend Hector is, you make a lot of enemies."
She sounded totally unconcerned.
"You know, you have really bad taste in men." I growled.
"No…" She contradicted. "I have a taste for really bad men. There's a difference."
"Yeah, I guess there is. Can you honestly say that you're okay with this?" I gestured to the horrifying meadow. "And with what you've done to Salvador?"
"Hey cube, if you want to blame someone about Sal, try yourself. If you hadn't blabbed about him in my club…" Olivia shrugged carelessly, and then raised her gun a little higher. "So scat, man. Time to face the music."
She jerked her free thumb over her shoulder, at which point I saw a huge greenhouse looming at the top of a vast hill.

I guessed it was all a choice of being sprouted by Olivia or Hector.
Well, why not? Lola, my crew, Alexi, and now Salvador… might as well add my name to the ever-growing list now that Hector had the tickets back.
Four years of fighting a corrupt system, and it all comes to this.
Time to put an end to my sorry existence then, if sprouting really was an end.
So I slowly trudged up the flowery hill to the foreboding greenhouse beyond, evidently intending to find that out.
I guess my situation gave all new meaning to the term 'walking the green mile'.

At the end of the path, I pushed open the greenhouse doors and went inside.
On the outside, it was more like a glass mansion than an actual greenhouse.
Once inside however, I discovered tables full of lush, sprouted souls lying everywhere.
A sprinkler system suspended over the tables gently misted the plants, keeping them healthy and alive.
Were these memorials, or trophies?
Hector stood there – in all his big-boned hideousness – with his back to me.
He held a single flower, pulling its petals off one at a time.
"She loves me…" He was whispering. "She loves me not…"
"Well," I announced harshly, "you're *half* right."
Hector turned slowly towards me, chuckling. "Oh, Manny! So cynical. What happened to you, Manny? What happened that caused you to lose your sense of hope? Your love of life?"
"I died."

Hector merely stood there for a moment before responding.

"I see." He shrugged. "Well, I guess Domino was right. You really don't have a shred of optimism."

"Well, when it comes to shreds," I needled, "Dom is the expert."

"And by that same logic, Manny…" Hector said affably. "*You're* about to become an expert in botany."

He turned away from me and began to fiddle with something on the table in front of him.

"Is this where you tell me about your secret plan, Hector?" I asked, more to provoke him than to get the answers. I knew them all already. "How you stole Double-N tickets from innocent souls, pretended to sell them, but then really hoarded them all for yourself in a desperate attempt to escape the Land of the Dead?"

"No." He said, turning back to me. Light glinted off the muzzle of the gun the instant before there was a flash, and a crack like thunder. A hard kick knocked me back a step or two, as I felt a harsh pain rocketing through my chest. "This is where *you* writhe around in excruciating pain for about an hour, because that idiot Bowlsley ran off with all the fast-acting Sproutella."

I clawed around for a moment before ripping the dart out from the rib it had struck and feebly fell to my knees.

"This slow stuff *will* sprout you…" Hector went on. "But it's going to take a very long time, I'm sorry to say."

I tried to say, 'Sure you're sorry, Hector.', but the words were riveted painfully in my neck.

I struggled back to my feet and immediately lost balance, stumbling backwards out of the greenhouse and breaking a few panes of glass in the doors on my way through.

As I staggered back down the hill I could hear Hector calling out to me.

"Manny? Where are you going? You've got some time, you know, before you have to leaf." He giggled and snorted at his lame-ass pun. "Get it? *Leaf!* "

I could hear him roaring with laughter behind me.

I lost my balance, rolling down the hill a few feet before coming to a stop amongst a patch of tulips.

The pain was nothing short of amazing. Even the severe heart attack I'd had hadn't been anything like this. I could see tiny leaves and stems of green with swelling buds pushing through the fabric of my new suit.

Hector was right. This stuff was *really* slow.

There was another pain in my side, which I took to be another flower pushing its way through my body. I reached down to claw at it, but suddenly felt cold metal pressing against my fingers.

In my bottom-left coat pocket was Toto's canister of liquid nitrogen.

I flopped over onto my back and wrenched the canister out. I ripped open my suit coat, tearing some vegetation in the process. That hurt even worse than just sprouting – I could literally *feel* the damage I was doing to the plants, as if they had become a part of me.

I braced myself for even more pain as I got my shirt open.

I had already nearly passed out from the unbearable sting. Half-blind with agony, I unscrewed the lid and emptied the cold canister over my chest. That's the last thing I remember.

Chapter 49 – Morbid Hector

When I came to, my chest was icy numb. The vegetation in my chest was still lined with frost, so I must've only been out for a few seconds.
The plants were brittle, and I felt nothing when I tore them from my chest. Then came the really tough part. I reached in with a single, bony finger and began whittling away on the rib which the dart had hit. I kept digging and scraping until I was sure that all the green-tinged bone and underlaying marrow was gone.
That gruesome task done, I fell back into the flowers and grass of all the souls beneath me and felt myself exhale.
"*Gracias*, Toto Santos." I breathed.

After lying completely still for another couple of minutes, I tried unsteadily to get to my feet. I felt a little weak, but I was okay – though I wasn't actually sure yet if that was a good thing.
I shuffled down the hill and through the meadow towards where the car I arrived in was still parked. Maybe I could jump Olivia, or maybe I'd just get sprouted again.
When I reached the car, I immediately saw Olivia crouched down behind it. She was digging furtively through the suitcase of Double-N tickets.
"Come on, shake it for me, baby." I heard her say. "One of you must be mine…"
I shook my head sadly. She was as clueless as the rest of Hector's puppets. Since Olivia was so absorbed in her search, I quietly peered through the still-open backdoor of the car to look for my gun.
Or any gun.
"Manuel…" A quiet voice said.
It was Salvador's head, still clinging to consciousness.
"Sal?" I whispered.
"Olivia has your gun. There is ammo in the trunk of this car, but she has the keys to that as well."
"Right." I said. Maybe I would have to jump her after all – not a happy thought. She was small, but built like a steel spring and at the moment I was weaker than a newborn infant.
"And, Manuel… tell Eva that I know she will guide the Alliance wisely when I am gone. For when I bite this explosive tooth in my mouth, the deadly cloud will sprout not just my target, but me as well."
"Your… target?" I asked, not entirely taking it in.
"*Hey!* " Olivia snapped from behind me. "Get out of there!"
"Farewell, my friend!" Salvador called as I backed out of the car.

When I was all the way out, I saw Olivia keeping her gun at a steady distance from my face.

"What were you talking about with the 'head' of the LSA in there?" She snarled, reaching in with her free hand and picking up what was left of Salvador. "Huh, Sal?" She mocked, giving his skull a hard shake. "Got something you want to share with the class?"

"Only this…" Salvador said calmly. "*Viva la Revolución* !"

He snapped his jaw shut. There was a loud pop and a cloud of green mist erupted around them, completely obscuring Olivia's face.

Olivia screamed loudly and dropped Salvador. By the time his head hit the ground, it was already completely hidden by leaves and flowers.

Olivia was only able to stagger a few steps from the car before falling.

She was still twitching and moaning painfully as I patted her down for the car keys.

One of her mossy hands clutched feebly at my lapel. I don't know whether it was meant as an attack or an entreaty, but I knew she could still hear me.

"Lola figured you'd end up this way, and I'd say you deserved it."

Her head lifted up a little, but only managed to emit thick gargling noises as splintery twigs broke through her jaws.

Olivia went limp, and her hand fell away from my coat.

When I finally found the keys and the gun she had dropped, I headed back to the car with the intention of closing the suitcase and loading up on ammo.

Before I could do anything however, I was stopped by a faint rustling sound.

There, fluttering among the white flowers blooming around Salvador's skull was a golden Double-N ticket.

It took a few moments for the significance of it all to sink in. He had a *ticket*. He had a well-deserved ticket on the Number Nine train and they made him a reaper.

I wouldn't have thought I could get any angrier. I just picked up the fluttering ticket and stuffed it into my pocket.

I closed the briefcase, opened the trunk of the car and threw it inside before loading up my gun with as much ammo as I could and stuffing a few more rounds into my pockets. With my lousy aim, I was sure to need them.

I turned back towards the greenhouse and cautiously made my way back up the hill. When I reached the top however, I didn't go inside. Instead I crept around the perimeter searching for a protective position to shoot from where I could cover the entrance as well – in case Hector tried to run for it.

There was a small hillock off to one side, which seemed like a good spot. I could duck behind it if necessary, and see most of the interior of the greenhouse from there. Problem was, Hector was over at the far end of the building. I needed to get closer.

"Hey, Hector…" I muttered sarcastically to myself. "Come over here so I can sprout you. Yeah, that'd work."

Obviously I needed a better way than just a blatant invitation; a way that would get him to move closer without giving myself away. Throwing pebbles or something against the glass ought to do it.

I rummaged around in the foliage for a while, feeling for something small and hard to throw. I came up with somebody's arm.
I roughly worked it free from the vegetation and brushed the layer of dirt off. Then, I stopped and stared in disbelief.
I tentatively picked up the little clump of dirt and held it up to the light coming from the greenhouse. The small, gritty lump was dark and moist.
I sniffed it. It *was* dirt. Not the usual sand or dust from the Land of the Dead… but honest-to-goodness *soil*.

"How long has this meadow been here?" I asked myself with a mixture of astonishment and disgust.
I threw away the piece of dirt and picked up the arm once more. I was about to pull the hand apart from the finger and wrist bones, but then I hesitated. Would the owner of the hand feel what I was about to do?

"Well, man… or ma'am… if you're here in any way, I'm sorry about this, but I need your hand if I'm gonna put Hector out of business."
I steeled myself and took the hand apart. When I had all the bones in a loose jumble, I stood up and threw them at the greenhouse as hard as I could, then ducked down low and peeked over the top of the hillock.
Hector was definitely moving toward my side of the greenhouse. He peered around through the glass.

"Olivia?" He called out, his voice muffled by the glass wall. "Who's out there?"
I raised my gun and took aim.

"I'm the grim reaper, lard ass!" I shouted, squeezing the trigger with all my might.
Glass shattered all around and Hector went down like a sack. But then, he sprang back up with his gun in-hand.
I had missed *again*, damnit.

"Shouldn't you be a patch of posies by now?" He shouted back, incredulous.
I answered by firing off another round.

"Nice try!" He called, shooting back.
But I had already flattened myself behind the hillock.
When the firing stopped, I peered slightly over the top. Hector was half-hidden behind a table, apparently trying to see out into the darkness.
It was now or never.
I leapt up from my spot and fired again. "That's for Salvador!" I screamed, firing wildly. "That's for the crew of the SS *Lola*! And *that's* for Lola herself!"

"Who the devil is Lo—" Hector began to shout back, as I aimed way above his head and fired once more.
He never finished the question.
There was a shrill scream of agony as Hector fell. I waited, crouching safely behind my hillock. The screams continued, and there was no sign of Hector getting back up again.

I sprinted away from my hiding place and around to the front doors. Cautiously, I crept inside, using the tables for cover in case he was still able to shoot.
But the horrific screaming still continued.
Hector's voice rose in pitch until he sounded like a little girl… a little girl being tortured and mutilated.
And I was the one who had made him sound like that.

When I got to where I could see him clearly again, I found Hector on his back, convulsing violently and hammering his skull against the cement floor. His enormous body was rapidly turning into a large shrub. Huge purple flowers bloomed everywhere, swelled into fruit, ripened and dropped off in wet splats all over the floor in only a matter of seconds.
Gradually, Hector grew still and his wailing faded to a frail whimper.
Then, complete silence.
I crossed myself for the first time since childhood.

After a moment of staring at the hideous shrubbery before me, I went back outside and tossed my gun away – there was no need for it now.
I made my way back down the path to the car, still humbled by what had taken place.
I picked up Savlador's sprouted head, unsure of what to do with it. Not having any better ideas, I took him back up to the greenhouse and put him on one of the tables nearest to the doors.
Returning to the car, I opened the driver-side door and slid in behind the wheel. I put the key into the ignition, but stopped. I hadn't driven in all the years I'd been in the Land of the Dead – I wondered if I still could.
Well, it'd be a long walk if I couldn't.
I started the engine and slowly backed up until I was clear of the terrible meadow. I turned the car around and carefully got back on the road that eventually took me to the highway.
Once back in town, I drove straight into the vicinity of Hector's casino, parked, got the case out of the trunk and made my way back to LSA headquarters.
Pyrrhus returning from the field of battle.

Chapter 50 – The Aftermath

When I re-entered the headquarters, I found Eva waiting there with Meché, Gunnar and several other agents.

"Manny!" Meché exclaimed as she threw herself at me. I dropped the briefcase and held her tightly for a few moments.

When I let go, I turned to Eva and the others. "Hector's gone. You don't have to worry about him anymore." I lifted up the suitcase and placed it on the table. "And here are all the tickets Hector stole. The *real* tickets. All we have to do now is get Meché safely away on the Number Nine."

The people around me didn't seem too elated.

"That's great." Eva said bluntly. "But we have a problem – no one's seen Salvador. He didn't show up at the rendezvous."

"Yeah." I replied. "I know all about that. Sal… I'm sorry, Eva… Sal's gone too."

Meché turned away, her head bowed. The others looked around, uncertain and troubled.

Eva walked over to me.

"How did it happen?" She asked, sounding dangerous.

"He was betrayed… we all were. Olivia…" I shrugged helplessly. "But Sal took care of her. He had this suicide tooth, and…"

I trailed off. There was no way I could do the story justice.

There were a couple of endless seconds in silence.

"*You* brought that woman here, Cal." Eva went on, much too quietly for the amount of anger I sensed in her. "We didn't do a proper check because *you* vouched for her. And now, because of *you*, Sal's—"

She broke off and turned away, hugging herself and evidently trying to keep her emotions under control.

I gently – though hesitantly – put my hand on her shoulder.

"She fooled me." I admitted, but not as an excuse. "She fooled every one of us. Including Sal."

I could see Gunnar nodding slowly.

"Including me." Eva said thickly.

She pulled away from me and left the room.

No one spoke for a while after that.

"Now what?" Meché finally asked.

"We wait until Eva comes back." Gunnar replied.

"And if she doesn't…?"

Gunnar shook his head, denying the possibility.

As it was, we only had to wait a few minutes before Eva returned.

She seemed a little different. Tired, or maybe empty… but no longer angry.

She walked up to me again, staring into my face. "Where did all this happen?"

"Hector has this… meadow… outside of town."

Eva nodded. "Yeah, we know about it."

"There's something else." I went on. I took the small ticket out of my pocket and held it out to Eva. "This belonged to Sal."
Eva sighed, as if nothing could surprise her anymore. She slowly took the ticket from me.
"That's impossible!" Gunnar exclaimed.
"Is it?" Eva answered sharply.
"Who knows?" An agent piped up. "Maybe Salvador was Hector's first victim. Maybe he stole his ticket and made him a reaper for revenge, hitting back at the system that stranded him here."
"And then his success gave him other ideas?" Another suggested.
"Does it matter?" I asked. "Hector's gone. We have the tickets, so let's just stop playing guessing games and get Meché on that train!"
There were nods from Gunnar and a few others.
"Where is he?" Eva interjected.
"What?" I asked, startled. The question seemed to have come out of nowhere.
"Salvador." She said. "Do you know where he is?"
"He's in the greenhouse." I answered. "On a table near the door. But only his head. I don't know where the rest of him is. I'm sorry."
Eva shook her head dismissively. "No, don't blame yourself. I don't, or I won't… later. We have to recover him. He has a ticket, and when I get out of this world I'm taking him with me."
"Yeah…" I nodded. "Sure, Eva."

The news about Hector broke the next morning. While it was still night, a band of LSA agents led by Gunnar (who had insisted Eva stay at headquarters, where she could be better protected along with myself and Meché) went out to the meadow to collect Salvador and Hector. Hector's remains were dumped in the alley behind his casino.
The LSA issued a statement to all news agencies that Hector was sprouted, saying where he could be found and that the LSA took responsibility.
The strange thing was that the media ran the statement verbatim. Before midday the authorities had confirmed that Hector had been sprouted and the news was everywhere. There was a faint hint of tough talk about Hector's racket from various quarters: some journalistic, some political, some DOD. And that was only the beginning.
There was still Hector's outfit to deal with, and the LSA had inside help… of a sort. With Hector gone, there were several contenders for his replacement. That was to be expected in a criminal organization, but in this case the competition was greatly intensified by the fact that the outfit had several parts that Hector had kept more-or-less separate. The gambling racket wasn't tied to the DOD operations at all, so its big boy tried to go completely independent – and might have done okay – except that the DOD element didn't like that at all. But the DOD operations weren't unified, either.

There was Hector's official position in the DOD, and the corrupted administration element naturally felt it was the obvious heir to Hector's empire. But the setup in the Bureau of Acquisitions – basically the successors to Copal and Domino – felt they were the real heart of the operation, which they sort of were, but only so far as Hector had been concerned personally. And, finally, there was the city administration. Hector had been 'elected' mayor of El Marrow the previous year; the ballot-stuffing was so blatant that Hector had gotten more votes than there were voters. His deputy naturally took over the city government, but he also wanted to take over the criminal enterprises which had similar plans for the city.
Nothing like a divided enemy to help the cause.
The outcome of the power struggle was a lot like an old Chicago mob war, which made it far too dangerous for Meché to try and get on the Number Nine.
Helping things along were some of the smart moves Eva was making, the first having been to arrange Hector's removal from the meadow. She wanted the existence of the greenhouse hidden from those who didn't already know about the site… until she was ready with her plans for it.
As the gang war was going, a small group from the Bureau of Acquisitions installed itself in the greenhouse – probably intending to make use of it in the same way Hector had. The meadow had been kept under close observation, so when the gangsters tried to move in Eva had agents armed with the fast-acting Sproutella take the meadow away from them. With enough agents to hold the area secure, she then had reporters brought out to see the meadow and greenhouse for themselves. That stirred up public opinion plenty, and having cleared the gangsters out ourselves helped correct the LSA's lingering terrorist rep.

Some time after that – when the gambling interest hit the mayor's residence and city hall particularly hard – the LSA immediately followed up with a strike of our own before the mayor's boys could regroup. The LSA quickly occupied both buildings and issued a call for a new mayor and city council, and vowed to remain in possession until free elections were held.
After the revelation of Hector's meadow and greenhouse, the press not only supported those demands, but screamed for a purge of DOD management as well. That, of course, was the LSA's main objective, but now it was becoming mainstream.
Now that Hector's gang was weakened and their atrocities exposed, it was becoming much safer for editorial boards and crusading journalists to trumpet an anti-corruption position. Public opinion was getting increasingly raucous while the police and prosecutor's office began to rediscover their duties.
All this was still just a beginning, but my part in the epic struggle was finally coming to an end.

Chapter 51 – Judgement Day

One day, I was in the chamber where the *Bone Wagon* was parked, reading the papers and talking over with Glottis the stuff that was going on, when Gunnar came up to me with a message.

"Hey, Manny." He said. "We just got word from our DOD liaison… about you."

"Me?" I asked, surprised. "What about me?"

"Well, it was a little vague. Apparently there's this cat named Yehuda who wants to talk to you at his place. You know him?"

"Hey…" Glottis said. "Isn't he the one who—"

"Just drop it!" I exclaimed, a little more harshly than I had intended.

"Okay." Glottis shrugged.

"Yeah, I know him." I said to Gunnar. "He was my first boss at the DOD. Do you know what he wants to talk about?"

Gunnar shook his head. "All the message said is that Yehuda wishes to speak with Agent Calavera."

"Well," I sighed, "I guess I'll just have to get it from him."

I started to move way, but Gunnar hastily grabbed my arm.

"You're not really going, are you?"

"Sure I am. Haven't you been hearing the news? Hector's not a hero anymore."

"So far that's just opportunism, man. Anyway, you know the streets still aren't all that safe."

"Yeah, but it's a lot safer than it was six weeks ago. Don't worry, I can trust Yehuda."

"You think?" Gunnar asked. "Like you said, he's Acquisitions… and if there's *anyone* in the Land of the Dead more desperate to get out of it than Hector was, it's gotta be *that* guy."

"You're wrong about that, *mano*." I countered. "He's too beaten down to have any fight left in him. And besides, what good would it do him to take me down?"

"If you say so, Manny." Gunnar shrugged. "Just don't let him kiss you, alright?"

"Jeez!" I exclaimed impatiently. "Lay off the man, will you?"

I walked away to find Eva and let her know where I was going.

The fact that Yehuda wanted to meet me at his home reassured me that everything was on the level. But I walked there only apparently alone, just in case things weren't.

I didn't see anything on the way that made me worried, though.

I knocked when I got to Yehuda's door. He let me in, as I stealthily waved off the agents watching me.

Yehuda actually seemed pleased to see me, in his broken-down, tired way.

He asked me to have a seat and began mixing drinks.

"I understand we are all greatly indebted to you, Manuel." He said as he handed the tumbler of scotch and soda to me, before taking a seat in the ancient-looking easy chair I remembered from the old days.

"In what way?" I asked, not seeing how the company could be in *my* debt.

"You eliminated Hector LeMans."

I tensed. "What makes you say that?"

It had been decided that people shouldn't get the idea that Hector had been taken down by any specific individual. Eva's intention being that, if it was thought that Hector had been sprouted by maybe a whole mob of LSA agents, Hector's outfit wouldn't know who to whack.

"Come, Manuel…" Yehuda chided wearily. "We both know I'm speaking the truth. You know because you pulled the trigger – as for myself, I was contacted by those 'higher up' who are… shall we say, incapable of being deceived." He tilted his head, and I merely nodded. "They are very pleased with you, in fact. Hector has been a cancer within the DOD for many years… far longer than you could ever know."

"Yeah?" I asked harshly. "So why didn't the company do anything about him?"

Yehuda sighed. "Because, in a sense, the company is not concerned. We humans have the power and the right… or perhaps it's the curse… to make this world into whatever we collectively want it to be. We can have justice or injustice. It is our choice, a choice they are unwilling to make for us."

"So *we* had to take care of Hector if anybody was going to, right?" I asked, still a little peeved. "They… whoever *they* are… left it to us."

"Yes." Yehuda answered. "We could tolerate him, accept him, make him our master… or reject him. However we choose."

"Harsh, *mano*."

"I won't argue the point, Manuel." He said with a sigh. "We took it upon ourselves – this power to choose – and so we must accept the consequences of that original choice. If a man sticks his hand into the fire, who is to blame for his injury – the man or the fire? We can't have the choice without having the responsibility, too."

"Well, I won't argue about it either."

The old man before me had been in the Land of the Dead for far too long. He had an answer to everything, even if it didn't answer anything at all.

"It's just that all those good people didn't *choose* to have Hector steal their tickets." I grimaced.

"No," Yehuda went on, "not individually. I don't expect you to understand it fully, Manuel… because I assure you that neither do I. But I've been told this will all work out for the best, eventually." His fingers absently toyed with the tattered red fringe on the arm of his chair. "For the near future, at least, those who were inclined to subvert the system will find themselves severely constrained. With Hector and the power he wielded gone, the apparatus of the DOD will restore discipline. As for the Lost Souls Alliance, I suspect they will be tolerated for a while longer, as they appear to have a worthwhile task to complete… but they will have to disband, eventually."

"I don't think Salvador ever expected it to be a permanent fixture." I nodded. "And even Eva doesn't plan on being in this world forever."

"Yes, but Eva must still await her own long struggle that looms ahead for her. Yours, however, is over."

Before I could ask what he meant, he extended his hand.

Twitching in his open palm was a Double-N ticket. It suddenly leapt towards me, and I caught it out of the air without thinking.

"You… you're kidding me, right?" I exclaimed. Yehuda merely shook his head. "You mean, Hector—"

"No, Manuel." Yehuda stopped me. "Hector had never interfered with your fate. I'm afraid you deserved to be a reaper. But, you have repaid your debt… over and above what you owed. Congratulations."

Somehow, I could sense a type of bitterness in his voice that was practically venomous.

"I don't get it…" I said slowly. "I didn't live my life any better than… than Domino, for instance. But he's scattered in pieces across the ocean floor, and you're now giving *me* a Double-N ticket. Why is that?"

"Perhaps, Manuel, it is because within you there is a kernel of decency. It took a while to… grow." He nodded, though I could almost see him skirt around the word 'sprout'. "But in the end, it bore fruit. Even hidden qualities shape our destinies. Perhaps you were made a reaper so that yours could show forth. Who can say for sure?"

"But what about you, man?"

"Again… who can say?" He repeated in a hollow voice, no longer able to meet my gaze.

Chapter 52 – The Number Nine Express

When I left Yehuda's house, an armoured LSA car quickly pulled up and drove me back to headquarters. I was still in something of a daze. I thought perhaps I was dreaming, but the Double-N ticket fluttering inside my breast pocket argued that I wasn't.

"Well?" Eva demanded when I walked into the room. "What did the miserable traitor want?"

"He wanted to give me this." I showed her the ticket. "I guess plugging Hector was somebody's idea of a good deed. He told me my debt's gone."

Eva merely gaped at the ticket.

"Cal!" She exclaimed excitedly. "That's… that's… I don't know *what* to say!"

So she gave me an enthusiastic hug of approval.

"I never thought I'd be dead long enough to see *you* speechless." I said with a laugh. "But I know how you feel. I'm a little overwhelmed, too."

"Yeah…" She exhaled. "Hey, Mercedes has to see this!"

She ran out of the chamber and came back with Meché in tow.

Eva pointed to me and chirped happily. "Look who just got himself a golden Double-N ticket!"

I showed Meché the ticket and she went wild, giving me a hug even more powerful than Eva's had been. When she finally let go of me, she laughed joyously.

"Now we can take the train ride together!"

"Nothing could be finer, angel." I said with a phantom smile.

Events seemed to move pretty quickly after that. There was no reason to delay, but precautions had to be taken. It had taken a still-corrupted DOD apparatus to get my ticket to Yehuda and tell him what it was all about, and by now that news could have leaked out.
On the other hand, that the DOD was able to deliver the ticket at all meant that the situation within the company had improved. But there was no sense in getting careless at this stage – not with the fate of so many others riding on mine. So an escort of LSA agents, plus a group of thoroughly-screened cops was carefully arranged. That took time, but when Eva was finally satisfied that everything was perfect, Meché and I collected the cases full of tickets, bid our farewells to Gunnar and the rest, and started on our way.

When we came to the chamber where Glottis and the *Bone Wagon* were, I looked up at him with glee.

"Hey *carnal*, wanna take a ride on the Number Nine?"

"Me?" He asked in surprise.

"Sure!" I said. "I've got my ticket, and we're all packed. Let's go!"

"Maybe Gunnar can look after the *Bone Wagon* while I'm gone…" Glottis pondered.

"I'm sure he'd be happy to, Glottis." Eva nodded.

"Well," I said to Eva, suddenly feeling both awkward and saddened at the same time, "I guess this is it."

"I guess so." She replied, sounding more than a little awkward herself. "You know, I sort of thought you'd be around a lot longer."

"Yeah. Me, too."

"But I'm glad you're finally getting out of here." She said. "I'll miss you, though."

"You'll make it, Eva." I assured her. "We'll see each other again, I'm sure of it."

"Don't wait up, I might be here a while yet." She said with a grim chuckle. Eva leaned over and gave me a small peck on the cheekbone.

"Bye, Cal." She turned to Meché and gave her a hug. "You take care of this miserable fraud, okay?"

"You can count on it." Meché laughed.

Meché and I walked out of the sewers and onto a dirt road around the outskirts of the city. We climbed into an armoured car, and were driven promptly to the train station.
To any disinterested onlooker, it was just one car in heavy traffic, but the 'traffic' was mostly a flock of cars full of LSA agents all around us.

When we grew closer to the staton, the uniformed cops armed with painful but non-sprouting shotguns stood like rows of corn all the way from the curb up to the waiting platform.
We got out of the car.
Meché was a little apprehensive when we rode the escalator up, probably recalling what happened last time she was here.
We crossed over to the platform. Glottis, who had been sent ahead, was waiting for us.
"Any ravens around, *carnal?*" I asked him.
"I don't smell any." He answered.
We showed our tickets to the conductor and boarded the train. We had the entire carriage to ourselves when it pulled out of the station, and shot away from El Marrow with blinding speed.
Finally, we were on our way.
When the city had disappeared behind us, I let myself totally relax for the first time in years.

On the evening of the second day, the Number Nine was already well out over the Sea of Lament. We were in the dining car when Meché turned to me with a worried look.
"Do you think there's any hope for Salvador? Even if he does have a ticket, he was sprouted and no one found his body…"
"I don't know." I answered honestly. "I'd like to think there is. I guess it depends on what really happens to a soul when they're sprouted. If Sal still exists somewhere, then maybe there's hope."
"I don't know what to hope for." Meché said. "I'd like to think that he could still have his rest in the next world, but there's no hope in that for all the other people who have been sprouted."
"Yeah, I know. It'd be fitting if Hector were stuck here forever so he could be made to suffer, but I don't want that for Lola."
Meché shook her head. "What a world we're leaving behind."
"No worse than the first one, I guess."
"I don't know what to think about it – I just want to get out of it."
"We're on our way." I assured her. "Nothing can stop us now."

On the fourth and final day, the Number Nine once again pulled into the temple station at the end of the line. I was a little nervous as we approached, half expecting the train to dive into a fiery pit. Instead, the train rolled to a slow stop and allowed us to get out and confront the Gatekeeper.
I snapped open the suitcase and showed him the tickets.
"You can count them if you want." Meché said. "They're all here."
"And how about yours?" The Gatekeeper droned at me.
I took the fluttering ticket out of my pocket and showed it to him.
"The company gave me one on the other end. Sort of a retirement present."
Then, I suddenly remembered Glottis, and turned around to where he was standing sadly behind us.

"And demons ride free, right?" I asked the Gatekeeper hopefully.

"Aw, Manny…" Glottis said, sounding more embarrassed than sad. "You know I can't go with ya'. I'm a spirit of the land, and all that – I can't ever leave this world."

I really wasn't all that surprised, just bitterly disappointed.

"I guess I got so wrapped up in saving people I just assumed I'd be able to save you, too." I said feebly.

"But I don't need to be 'saved'." He protested cheerfully. "I *like* it here! I'm not all alone in that basement anymore, thanks to you. I've got a new job wrenchin' for the LSA and all these new friends… I'm a big demon success story!"

He was right, but it hurt to admit it, even just to myself.

Glottis had been my only constant companion in the last few years, and the only thing I could depend on.

Especially when I couldn't even depend on myself.

Still, there was no appeal against fate.

"So…" I said, repressing a sob. "I guess this is it then."

I held out my hand to the big guy.

Glottis spread his arms wide and gave me a sorrowful smile.

"Come 'ere." He said. "Gimmie a hug!" He scooped me up into a tight bearhug, popping my spine in a dozen places as his massive arms squashed me into his chest. "You're the best boss I ever had."

He began sniffling sadly.

The train's whistle sounded loudly, and Glottis reluctantly put me down. I could still see the tears welled up inside his beady eyes.

"Take care of yourself." I said reassuringly.

"Don't worry, Manny." He replied, sounding happier than he looked. "I'll be fine. And I'll take good care of the *Bone Wagon*, too. Every soul I meet, I'll have to tell them about the races we've won. Promise."

With a final wave goodbye to Glottis, Meché and I boarded the train. While I had been saying farewell to Glottis, everybody was freed from the waiting room and were surging onboard ahead of us.

Pugsy and Bibi were swooping and diving over everyone's heads, laughing and playing merrily. They spotted Meché and me and dove around us, pulling Glottis' ears and stealing Meché's hat before we got them settled down.

Once everyone had boarded, Meché and I returned to our compartment.

I was waving one last time to Glottis through the window, when I felt Meché put her hand on my arm.

"Manny?"

"Yeah?"

"When we get to the next world…" She trailed off.

I took her hands in mine. "What is it, angel?"

"Will we still be together?" She finished anxiously.

There was only one answer to that. "You know, sweetheart," I said, "if there's one thing I've learned, it's this: nobody knows what's gonna happen at the end of the line, so you might as well just enjoy the trip."

Meché just smiled at me. I could sense her relief at finally going to the place we were meant to be. Though I didn't really say anything after that, I think Meché could sense my relief too.

The train finally pulled away from the station one more time, and I caught my last sight of Glottis and the tiny mechanic demons. At that moment, I knew he was going to be fine.
And so were we.
The Number Nine seemed to be moving along at a somewhat slower pace now. Although we entered the dark tunnel, the black shroud that surrounded us felt strangely peaceful in a way I couldn't really explain.
As I held Meché's hand in mine, the atmosphere was as smooth and quiet as the ride itself.
And, through the silence, I could almost still hear Chepito's song echoing merrily inside the tunnel.

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!